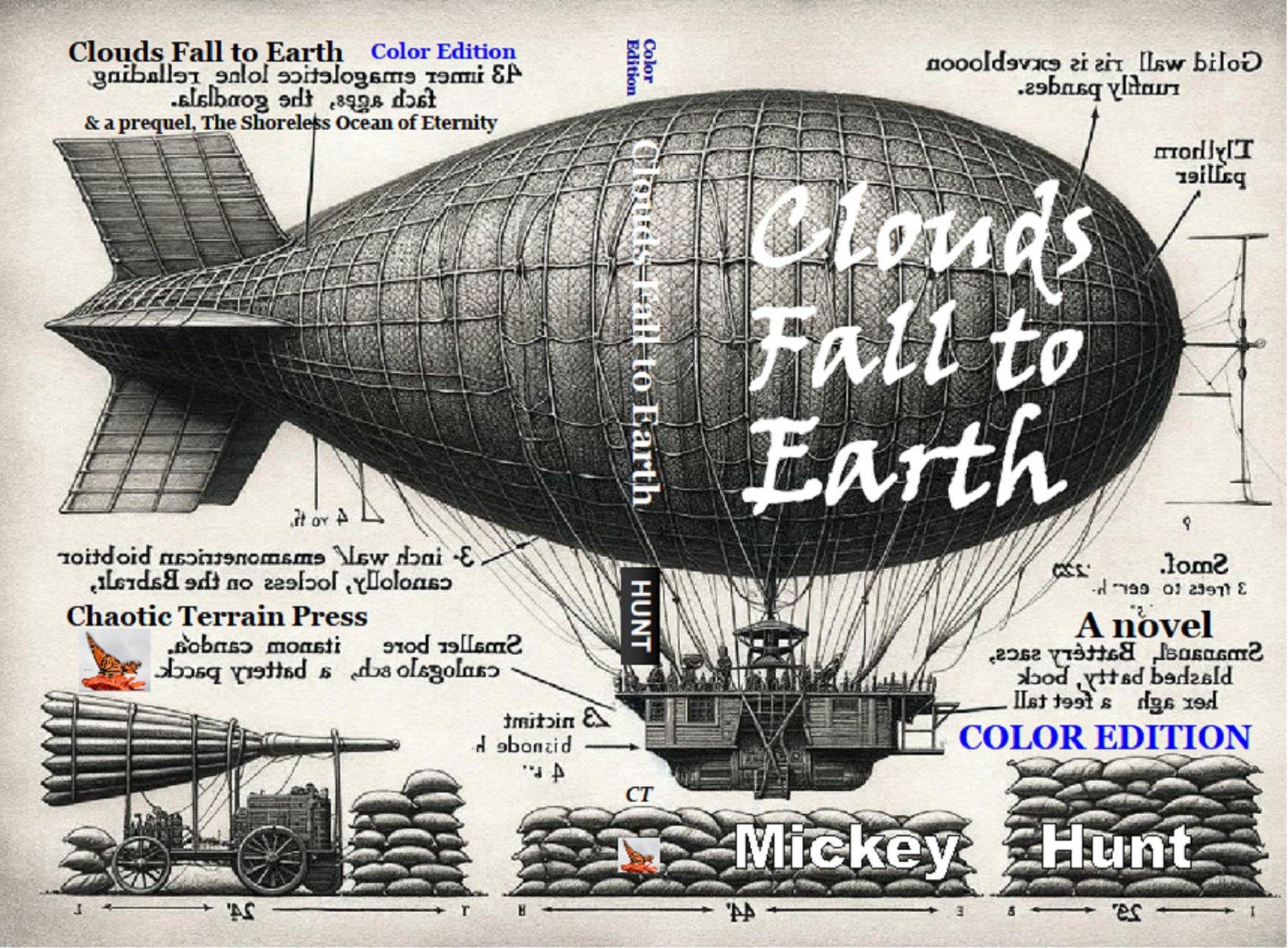
Clouds Fall to Earth Color Edition

& a prequel, The Shoreless Ocean of Eternity



Clouds Fall to Earth

Color Edition

HUNT

Chaotic Terrain Press

A novel

COLOR EDITION

Mickey Hunt

Aleutian Islands, Summer 2024

Clouds Fall To Earth

COLOR EDITION

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The dirigibles and other artifacts featured in the illustrations of this book do not represent the aircraft of the story, but rather depict imaginative renderings of artwork Leonardo da Vinci and modern designers might have created, including on the cover, his labels written backwards.

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Clouds Fall to Earth

When clouds are heavier than air,
an uplifting wind must keep them aloft.

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Thank you,

Patrick O’Brian

& Steve Fossett

One

Hunting Day

Rho Aquilae encounters earthbound people for the first time.

Rho woke from his nap and felt like throwing up. His berth seemed to sway and rock, but in reality it was immobile, at least as motionless as the surface of the rotating planet. No ground winds swept the plain where his family's dirigible had anchored for hunting day, and it was this lack of movement that made his stomach turn and his head swim. Continuous motion was the normal state of his life.

The sun did not recede below the horizon for long during the summer season at this place on the Earth, and the sky was mostly clear, and so while it was not long past midnight, visibility prevailed.

Rho rolled from his bed, rinsed his face with water, donned his compact goose-down hunting vest and joined his father, brother, and mother, who already had risen and were eating a meal of dried meat and fruit in the dining area.

"Good day, son. I hope you slept well," his father said briskly when Rho took his seat beside Deneb, his brother. "We have strenuous work ahead. Did you charge the e-m guns?"

"Yes, sir," Rho answered, "and the extra batteries."

"Now, I know you're both experienced hunters," Saiph said, projecting calm and strength, "but we must review our procedures as always. Success depends upon not taking anything for granted and becoming overconfident. Being members of the hunter caste means others depend upon us. Um. Will you review this time, Deneb?"

"Certainly."

Deneb was two years younger than Rho, and though he was a hunter, unlike his brother and other close relations, he was fine-boned like most people of the other castes. His specialty was falconry, which he could perform from the dirigible, but he also was knowledgeable about ground hunts.

"For our target game of tarandus," he began, reciting,

"the e-m rifle can deliver a maximum of three lethal shots before you need to change the battery. After three you'll only wound, unless you're lucky. But it's unlikely we'll need to fire more than three, except in a self-defense emergency against the insan-hayawan. For this hunt we are to spread out to the optimal distance and move the game toward our uncles and cousins who are in the alder grove to the east."

"Remember to use radios only when necessary," interjected Saiph, "and Vela…" here he turned to his wife, "Be sure to bring enough baskets after the kill, and you, Deneb, will help her. Rho, call your uncle Mirfak and find out when they are in place."

"Are there . . ." Deneb began and halted. "Will we see hayawan here?"

"Probably," his father answered. "Remember that while they look sapien, they're really animals—worse than animals—and more intelligent, best avoided but only worthy of being killed. If they capture you, they'll likely eat you, after they sacrifice you to their idols."

"Your father exaggerates sometimes when he speaks of the insan-hayawan," Vela said. "Your uncle spotted smoke of a village when he arrived, but it's far away from us."

"They're dangerous," his father only said, firmly.

Rho enjoyed the give and take between his parents, both of them ageless and energetic; his father, though not especially large, was the strongest man he'd ever seen, and his mother the kindest and most beautiful woman. He stood from the table and cleared his place, then he went to the radio room and called his uncle. His older cousin, Chertan, answered, "One hour. We'll be ready in one hour.'

"Let's hurry then," his father said, overhearing. "We don't want them to wait. Rho, you climb topside for a final survey for the tarandus herd."

Rho stepped out of the compartment to the rail and took in the view. The sky was grey and blue, the earth surface before him stretched away brown, golden, and green with subtle masses of rose. Between sky and earth stood a line of

pyramidal rock and ice-covered mountains. From the perspective of being anchored, the mountains seemed taller, sharper than usual, standing in high relief. Across the stretch of turf and low trees before him, perhaps three kilometers away and a kilometer between them, he could make out two small patches glimmering against the background, like rippling heat waves rising from desert sand. Those would be the camouflaged dirigibles of his uncles Mirfak and Rasalas and their families.

He arched his back and stretched his whole body before scampering up a rope ladder attached to the silvery dirigible skin. He could feel the gentle, comforting sway of the inflated envelope. His gaze lingered upon his glider perched topside and tied down, and he smiled in anticipation of soaring during the Annuary holidays when his family flight would meet with hundreds of others from around the planet. He always looked forward to this, the most important and largest of the annual gatherings where people would trade, visit relatives, perform dramas, see doctors and have surgeries, and when for sport, the young people would catch mountain waves of air and sail high up into the southern polar vortex where the sky was always black and speckled with stars even during daytime. But this coming Annuary was to be even more amazing than usual, because he was to be married…

Rho abruptly remembered his task and took up his binoculars. Scanning all around, he found a grey forest in the east with leading lines creeping almost imperceptibly from northwest to southeast. This was the tarandus herd. He zoomed in and could easily see their antlers and catch their distinctive pacing gait, and he noted their bearing on the compass, took another longing look at his glider and climbed down to the lower platform.

Saiph and Deneb had gathered all their needed material and Vela handed them food parcels. “The surface water should be clean here,” she said and gave them quick hugs.

Rho climbed down the short, silky ladder following the other two men and planted his feet on the ground. It always

took him a few seconds to steady himself upon the hard earth, and Rho looked up at their dirigible looming overhead. Its solar-collecting fabric blending with the blue sky and quiet white of high clouds. Rho marveled at the ancient technology that gathered color from one side of the craft and projected it to the opposite side, making their airship practically invisible.

The men took compass readings and fanned out. Fortunately, the bloodsucking culicids—which in this part of the world in certain seasons often formed deafening, whining clouds around people and animals alike—were not bad today, and he didn't need a veil. Rho had taken the left position across the open ground, and after he drew in several deep breaths to calm his racing heart as he said to himself, "relax and be alert," he soon found a trail that tracked up into a gulley with a slow creek moving through spongy turf. There were deep, wide footprints pressed into the turf, and Rho knew this to be an occasional ursus trail. The gully gave him cover for approaching the herd—which he could now hear grunting and thrumming, though he could not see it—but the cover also made the trail dangerous because of his limited sight range.

As he walked along, he decided to leave this risky trail and move toward a rise to his left, but he waited too late. When he rounded a corner of a group of willows, a massive, shaggy, humped boar ursus was right there in front of him ripping chunks of flesh from a carcass.

Rho froze, and sharp prickles shot into his hands and feet from a jolt of adrenaline. He began backing up, hoping the ursus would not notice him—a breeze was in Rho's face, but the ursus caught movement, looked up, and with no hesitation at all, charged. The animal rushed toward him with improbable speed for its size, the stored fat between skin and muscles quivering. Rho yelled and raised his weapon, and the ursus stopped.

There was long waiting and neither moved. The ursus chomped his teeth and Rho began backing away again, his motion certainly non-threatening. But suddenly, still unsteady on his feet, Rho tripped and fell backward, and the ursus

charged again. Rho knew this was no bluff.

He sprang back to his feet and darted toward a large boulder. The bounding ursus was closing and Rho fired wild behind him and missed. The ursus was nearly to him, and Rho breathed deeply, suppressing his fear as he waited for the hum of the e-m rifle to rise to its optimal pitch. He fired again, too early for the battery. But this shot at point-blank range burned a 20 millimeter hole through the creature's heart. The ursus collapsed at his feet, dragged itself, struggled to rise, and Rho shot again immediately into its skull centered over the eyes without waiting for the ignition coil to fully reset.

The ursus breathed twice with a long pause between and stopped moving. Rho himself took several deep breaths to calm his heart, drew his knife and stepped to the animal's side. He knelt down quickly and inserted his knife at the correct place over the breast bone and powerfully up-twisted, lifted, and jumped back. Blood from the ursus's arteries and heart wound oozed into the ground, steam emanating from the stream and the growing pool in the rocks, and at the same time the ursus kicked and clawed spasmodically and then finally grew still.

Rho walked to the boulder, climbed up, and sat there a few moments to let his shock and fear subside. He noticed the queasiness and dizziness were gone—excitement had driven them away. He then radioed to his father. "I've killed an ursus arctos, sir," he said. "A large boar, approximately… 500 kilos. Will you report to mother so she can triangulate its location?"

"Yes, son. Good work. Be sure to dress it right away so its heat will dissipate. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. You may wish to go slower so that I can line up for driving the tarandus."

"We'll wait for you."

Rho dressed the ursus quickly, tying off and cutting around the penis and anus, and removing the intestines and other internal organs. This took only a few minutes. The hardest part was splitting the pelvic bone so that the colon could be pulled out intact. For this he used a special field saw

he always carried on a hunt. Afterwards he rinsed in the icy stream, took a long drink, called his father, and then walked up to the rise and resumed his job as a driver.

The remainder of the hunt was routine, but Rho enjoyed watching the tarandus herd move in reaction to their efficient human predators. Individual animals on the perimeter moved away from him and the other drivers. Animals inside the herd, while they could not see the hunters, maintained a short distance from their fellows so that they all flowed as one large mass with smaller internal streams that turned in counterpoint circles—a natural artistic expression. The herd together had greater perception intelligence than any individual member, but they were no match for the humans who would harvest what they needed. The four shooters, who were Rho's uncles Mirfak and Rasalas, Rasalas' son-in-law Tarraz, and Rho's grandfather Leo, picked out and dropped mid-sized bulls so as to let the large ones live and breed, keeping the species strong. The hum and whine of the weapons spooked the herd somewhat, but they couldn't fix a location on the sources and moved aimlessly.

Tired from the stress of the ursus kill and from running, Rho lingered on the ground long after the last packer had departed. He drank some water and ate a handful of dried fruit. Because of the exhausting nature of their work, drivers were often exempted from guiding the full, heavy baskets made lighter from small, gas-filled balloons, but everyone else helped carry to the three reunited dirigibles. Rho enjoyed the earthside. It would be awhile before the next hunt. His people would preserve the meat by use of ultra-violet exposure that sterilized its surface along with a combination of air drying and electric dehydration. Some of the raw meat was cooked by means of microwaves. This preservation work would take days of drifting aloft, and Rho wished to enjoy the close smells of the flora masses and sounds of the land wind in peace. A kind of soft dusk approached when the sun passed behind a mountain range. Rho sat on a rise and thought of Lyra, his fianceé. He remembered when they met at the last

Annuary gathering. He had been one of the young men to be selected in the yearly lottery that gave him the opportunity to pick a wife. Of the few single women of marriageable age, he liked her best.

Rho woke from his nap without moving, his whole mind and body in rosy contentment. When he opened his eyes, he caught motion not far across the plain. Slowly he lifted his binoculars and what he saw took his breath away. It was a line of hayawan armed with their primitive weapons. Perhaps they were following the tarandus herd. Most of the males carried long spears or bowed sticks. Rho wondered how effective these might be and thought he should research this. The hayawan appeared somewhat human, almost human in fact, but the legends of his people and occasional current news reports over the long-range radio confirmed their violent barbarity and sordid customs. Rho had been taught to fear them even more than the ursus. Never before had he been this close. Assured by the breeze on his face that would keep them and their white and black lupi from smelling him, Rho held his position and continued to observe. Their bone structure appeared to be heavier than that of people, and their skin color was slightly darker than that of his own family group, but other than these differences, it would have been hard to tell these creatures apart from real persons.

As he looked, Rho's heart and belly lurched. Into his view had stepped a young female, one developed enough that, if she was not yet paired with a male, she soon would be. She wore a loose, dun-colored dress and a necklace of small white and red stones. Dark, thick braids of her hair flopped on her back as she walked. The movement of her body, the curve of her bare neck…

Rho stared and was unaware that his mouth was open. He lowered his binoculars and dared not look again, but he could still see her in his mind. The teachings of his people had presented the hayawan as being so completely repugnant that apparently no one thought to warn against the bewitching

appearance of their young females. Rho shivered and tried to shake free the image that gripped him. He stood up slowly and moved away from the viewpoint toward his family dirigible. When he felt that there was sufficient distance from the group of hayawan to be safe, he ran the rest of the way home to find everyone busy with slicing meat in preparation for drying.

Caribou, Denali NP, Summer 2019

Two

Algolim

Soon after Rho arrived at the assembling point, his family members pulled the anchor screws from the ground. Rho was last to nimbly climb up the short ropes to the dirigibles. The loosed ballast cascaded down, the burners engaged with a jetting roar, and the three warming dirigibles rose and began drifting to the east. Safe again in the air with the green and brown ground slowly sweeping below him, Rho felt his inner stress melt and evaporate.

He made his way to the communications room, sat down at the radio desk and dialed to Lyra's frequency. Though she and her flight were presently on the other side of the globe, the atmospheric conditions were perfect and radio waves carried his greeting just under the speed of light. She seemed to have been waiting for him to call because she answered immediately.

"Hello my friend," she said in a lovely voice. "So, tell me about your hunt. But wait, let me call everyone here."

Prolonged moments later when Lyra said that those of her family on board her dirigible who were not working had assembled, Rho began describing the details of the hunt, including the ursus tale, but he left out what he thought about the hayawan female, of course. He felt self-conscious and tried hard to make the story interesting because Lyra's caste were musicians and storytellers, and this material would likely appear in some future dramatic presentation broadcasted around the world. Rho spared the bloody details. But he was sure Lyra and her family had heard such things before, because a girl from the hunter caste had married into her family group. Lyra always said to him she was excited about joining his family because it would be so different from her own experience. In all her years, she said, she had never set foot upon the ground.

When he was finished telling the story, anonymous

voices asked him questions and afterward there was a period of silence.

Then Lyra said, “Did the ursus really almost reach you? Were you scared?”

“Yes.”

Rho felt awkward, not knowing what was happening on her end. He wished that he could receive and send visual images, but when the remaining functional satellites expired five and some centuries ago, the people found they hadn’t preserved that specific technology. When Rho thought that enough time had passed to allow people to leave Lyra and him in private, he asked, “What have you been doing lately?”

“Other than music practice, rehearsals and chores, I’ve been making wedding plans. Sewing gowns and helping with arrangements.”

“Good.” Rho’s heart accelerated as he thought of seeing Lyra again when they would embark upon their close lifelong relationship, she leaving her family for the first time and joining his. Crowds would attend the wedding. The Annuary gathering was the most popular time for weddings, and many people attended them and brought food, even people who did not know the principal families. Weddings were a form of entertainment because of the music, and family legends that were recounted during the feasting and dancing that followed the ceremony. Rho waited for Lyra to tell him more about the preparations, but she said nothing. For some reason she was not her usual talkative self.

“Is there anything wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. I have been tired, and some women’s problems. Anemia. Nothing serious, I guess.”

“Have you consulted a doctor?”

“Yes, by radio, but it’s too early to tell anything. In a week or so I’ll know more. When I can actually see a doctor at the gathering. We have medical people in our flight, but not a physician or a specialist.”

“My uncle’s Rasalas’ wife, Betria, trained as a physician. I’ll take good care of you when you join us.”

Lyra appropriately giggled and Rho guessed she was blushing.

"There's a historical drama/documentary coming up in one hour that I'd like to listen to," he said. "Can we listen together and then talk about it? It's about the world before the deluge, I think."

"Sure. I think we plan to hear it too, if it's the same one. But I thought it was to be a debate. I know the people who prepared it."

"Ah… You are correct. A debate it is."

Rho and Lyra concluded their conversation by agreeing to talk again when the program was over and Rho switched off the radio. He wandered over the aircraft to see if he was needed anywhere. Everyone seemed occupied at various tasks. His grandfather Leo, who ordinarily lived with Mirfak, had joined them and was napping on the balcony. He frequently visited the other two dirigibles so he could be nearer to his grandchildren. Rho's brother was hand-feeding scraps of tarandus to his hunting gyrfals, his mother was in the kitchen preparing the upcoming meal, and his father sat at the common table studying the updated wind charts on his server screen.

His father said, "You look tired from the hunt, son. Why not rest?"

Rho went to his and his brother's tiny compartment for his eiderdown sleeping bag which he took back outside and nestled into it on a long chair fixed to the deck. He watched the clouds until sleep found him. In twenty minutes he awoke, stowed his bag away and joined the family in the kitchen. He helped set the table. After a moment of silent thanks for "creation's great providence," his brother put on the radio. They began eating their meal, and a man's rich voice came over the radio.

"Greetings everyone around the Earth. This is Itai Auriga, Storyteller. We have an unusual program for you today. It's about an issue of grave concern. After an introduction, a proposition, and a presentation of central facts,

we will have two sides represented. And I hope after our program you will begin a discussion in your own flight-groups and families."

After a musical interlude of harp and wooden flute, the voice of Itai began again.

"The people have lived in the air for over sixteen hundred years. When the oceans began to rise and cover the Earth, wars broke out everywhere. They were wars—some between nations and some between neighbors who fought over who would possess the shrinking lands. Chaos reigned. Our ancestors found an ingenious escape from the violence. Many of them were balloonists. Some were engineers and heavier-than-air aviators. They gathered from around the Earth, and designed aircraft with internal skeletons that could carry dwellings. They made balloon envelopes that collected light and color to camouflage them. The fabric gathered solar energy which could be stored. The people devised means by which oxygen and hydrogen could be separated from water, and the balloons contained cells of hydrogen and a surrounding sleeve of normal air. Hydrogen neutralized gravity, and the sun and flammable gas provided power for lift, for limited mobility, and for needs of lighting and cooking.

"While the surface-bound humans destroyed each other and degraded into primitive barbarism, we drifted the skies of Earth, sailing the furious jet streams, studying the stars, reveling upon the always changing skyscapes, making music, harvesting from our floating gardens, hunting food from the land, fishing from the ocean, perfecting our civilization and enjoying a life fragile and yet harmonious with the natural world. Our people lived in small sailing colonies that followed the wind. We have studied the locations of raw materials that we need to maintain and build our aircrafts and other artifacts, and by coordinating with other colonies, we met and traded. Some colonies specialized in manufacturing materials and tools. Some in art and music.

"All our young people learned to build simple servers,

and by them we collected and remembered the history of the world and plotted our journeys through the sky. When we took to the air, we brought radios which we still use to communicate and share stories. Over time we developed a common language that we call Anglosi. Of necessity, marriages were coordinated, sometimes arranged. When the time for the wedding neared, the careful plotting of paths was essential, and after a ceremony and celebration, the young woman joined the man's flight-colony. Children were usually named after the stars, which we use to know our courses. When a colony grows a certain size, it splits into two. These are occasions of sorrow of separation and joy that our way of life is preserved and propagated.

"But we are now learning that our life can not continue without a change."

A harp and flute filled a pause in the narrative and Deneb said, "Why is he recounting all this? I've heard it all a hundred times."

Their father and mother, Saiph and Vela, who had been listening enraptured as if every detail was astonishing news, said, Shhh!" with impatient vexation on their faces, and at the same time, Rho said, "It's for children, Deneb. He's speaking again."

"Generation by generation our bodies are becoming weaker genetically. We grow smaller and thinner, despite the strengthening physical challenges we face. We don't know why, exactly. Perhaps partly a consequence of UV exposure. Our bones are becoming brittle, women perish in childbirth and from unknown causes, and as a people, we are dying away. We are in a moment of crisis. As dangerous and dreadful as it will be, to survive we must consider returning to live on the hard land. Our physicians believe it is the surface that kept us strong in the past. Exposure to the minute stresses, bacteria, and even the minerals themselves kept us strong. The savage animal-humans below fear us and will kill us whenever possible. They carry disease. We are not defenseless against violence, but we have learned to love

peace. Shall we then return to the land and give up our lives? Or, shall we continue living as we have, sailing the skies, and in time fade from existence? In a few moments, presenters will argue each side."

More music flowed from the radio and the family finished their meal. Rho and Deneb collected the eating implements, washed, and put them away. When he returned to the radio room, a woman's voice was reciting facts about the general decline in population.

Next, came a man who, without passion, spoke of the essential need for purity, even if people ceased to exist over the Earth. The woman's voice returned with a plan for establishing fortified colonies away from larger clans of the animal-humans. The man came back with arguments of how such plans would fail, and the best course would be to preserve the present ideal culture, that somehow an answer would be found—have they not already solved so many problems of living in the air? And even if they did die away, they will have maintained their freedom from corruption, which will preserve their place in eternity, they as people, the crown of all creation, will always have existed.

And so, the debate went back and forth in Rho's ears until he fell asleep.

When he came back around, his father was speaking. "I'm dead set against moving to the land," he said. It provides us food, clothing, and material, and I'm pleased to be in the hunter caste, but I'm always glad to be home again, to rise away from the smell, heat, noise, and the dirt of the surface. I love the changing sculpture of sky, the water vapor fractals, the fields of clouds. I love soaring through the upper layers of air. It's a fine and sometimes beautiful place to hunt and gather, but I could never live on the land permanently—I know what it's like—it would kill me. When our people left those centuries ago, it was never to return."

"Our elders will decide soon what they will recommend," his mother said. "I agree with you, husband, but it's not our place alone to say what we'll do."

"I have a voice, and if the elders decide to leave the air, I won't join them. Most of them have no idea what it's like down there. The insan-hayawan are degraded. They . . . I can't tell you how degraded. They would infect all of us. They would kill us, the other castes faster than us. This is why we left living on the ground in the first place centuries ago."

"If the others return to the ground, can we live on our own?" Vela asked with fear in her voice. "Will you become a rebel then, a pirate, one of the algolim?"

"Our caste could do well without storytellers or manufacturers. We can collect everything we need, and keep our home in repair for many years without new inputs. Besides, we can still trade with them, if they don't shun us."

"They won't shun us," Vela said.

"They won't, I know."

"We had good reasons to shun the algolim, don't you give them a reason."

"But if anyone who settles onto the land breeds with the insan-hayawan, this will be reason to disown *them*," his father said and abruptly left the room.

Rho pulled his eiderdown cover over him in bed. His mind was uneasy. Whatever principles might be important in the debates, the fact was indisputable. People were not reproducing themselves in sufficient numbers. His uncle Mirfak's wife Aludra bore two children, but she died soon afterwards. Though about of marriageable age, neither his cousins Chertan or Chort had been selected in the lottery, so unless something unusual happened, they never would be married.

Rasalas' wife Betria bore his cousin Cassio who married Tarraz from the crafters, but despite every intention, Tarraz had never conceived once. The only children in their flight group were Rasalas and Betria's Subra, age 5 and Duhr, age 8, both of them boys. Among his whole family, until the

boys were old enough for the lottery, only Rho had a chance with Lyra to bring girls into the world…

When Rho opened his eyes later, a lingering dream of the female insan-hayawan embraced his mind and body. She had been standing next to him, her hip touching his as they looked at something in the distance. He shivered to push the feelings away. The rest of his family, except someone on watch, were likely sleeping. He rose up and trod quietly to the server station, sat down and began searching the historical archives for information on hunting bows. He read an encyclopedia article about the different types and their construction, and the thought grew in his mind, "Someday I'll build one and a complement of arrows."

Within a short span the other family members had risen from bed and they sat down together at table for a meal. Afterwards, Rho stepped outside to survey the sky. Their next locational goal would be the eiderdown coasts, still in the northern hemisphere. After this they would navigate to a certain, designated area over the Pacific Ocean in the southern hemisphere for the annual gathering. Presently then, their flight must continue a fairly low course until they could rise to catch a channel of the jet stream for the long-distance voyage. Currently their flight of three aircraft rode above a dense white foundation of turbulent clouds. The ground, where surely it was raining now, couldn't be seen below, and the limitless sky shone brilliantly blue above and around them.

"Hoy! Hoy! Hoy! Algolim! Two craft dead ahead." The shrill voice of Deneb came from on top.

Saiph ran out to the deck. "Where?" he said and lifted up binoculars.

"Over that curl of cloud to windward," Deneb shouted.

"Yes. There they are. Algolim," Saiph said to himself, and then louder "And weren't we just speaking of pirates? Leo, please call my brothers."

"I have, son," Leo said. "Mirfak spotted them on radar, but said we will outrun them."

"I wonder. They're moving faster than the air." His

voice suddenly loud like thunder, he bellowed, “Everyone to stations! Secure and hold on!”

Shocked motionless by the force of the command, which he had only ever heard in drills, Rho stared at a dozen algolim aircraft rising from the clouds to leeward before him. Their motive propellers chopped the air as the craft held their places, which meant that Rho’s family’s’ flight would drift right into them, within range of weapons in seconds. His family had driven into the waiting craft just like the tarandus herd drove toward the waiting shooters.

Rho clambered down to the lower e-m cannon, checked the battery and took aim at the nearest vessel, which, though small in the sky would be an easy target, but that meant his craft would be an easy target, too. The algolim would destroy any craft that didn’t surrender. Any craft that did surrender would be robbed and its women kidnapped and raped. Often they’d steal the babies.

Rho could hear the swishing of the pirates’ human-powered propellers. They seemed also to have some kind of hazardous hydrogen-fueled propulsion. He heard his mother inside the cabins lecturing herself as she fastened down or stowed anything that might be loose. “Okay, the servers are all tied down, last to pack is the, the eating utensils.”

The algolim vessel in his sights whined as its cannon charged and an instant later, Rho charged his cannon. Steam began pouring from the cooling ducts of the family dirigible from the main batteries.

“Now, now, fire and release, fire and release!” Saiph’s voice boomed.

Roe fired once, and heard a great whooshing noise over the impact of air pressure from his cannon as he grabbed hold of the nearest rope and braced his legs into a corner of his weapon’s pod, because suddenly he was weightless.

The sky vanished as the dirigible plummeted like rock ballast into the wet, cold, dark cloud mass. Not entirely like ballast, because it bumped and shuddered from the stormy, unstable interior of the cloud, and the dirigible still had some

residual lift. The dirigible fell and fell. Alarming as this was, Rho was certain that the envelope had not been hit, rather that his brother had, as ordered, pulled the master control that released every bit of the warm air from its compartments. The sky floor below grew subtlety brighter, Rho heard the welcome hiss of emergency burners, felt the release of emergency ballast, and the perilous descent slowed and stopped just as the dirigible cleared the clouds. Rain was pelting Rho by now, and the ground was just there, just there no more than a couple hundred meters below. Rocks and a valley. A braided river.

"Stand ready," Rho's father boomed.

Tense moments passed as the dirigible drifted forward. Would the pirates follow? If so, the attackers were doomed, because Rho's father waited at the upper cannon and Rho at the lower. One apparently had released its hot air and came rocketing down, passing within a few meters. Rho gazed at the faces of the men, the demon faces, who were as stunned at the dangerous proximity to his cannon's muzzle as he was, but they had a more deadly enemy at hand about which to worry. They were descending far too fast, and their technology or skill being inferior, they couldn't stop their fall in time and bashed hard onto the ground spilling pirates all around, some killed no doubt, most injured. Those few not crippled scrambled to cut loose their hydrogen envelope which rapidly rose away.

"Fire Rho, fire!"

Rho had it sighted and squeezed the trigger. A great ball of flame replaced the brown envelope and an instant later, Rho felt a sun on his face, a deafening roar, and pressure on his heart as the shock wave hit. Moments later, his grandfather stumbled, blinking, from the cabin.

"What damage?" Rho asked. "Injuries?"

"None I know of. Your mother is fine. Your brother, over-excited. Your uncles are hiding in the clouds and everyone is safe, unharmed. *That* was a shocking explosion."

"What will happen now?"

"They attacked in silence, but now they are talking, and though I can't unscramble their radio messages, I suppose they're breaking off pursuit to pull in survivors. They've got to be concerned that we blew up one of their vessels. We'll wait awhile to be certain."

Since Saiph still manned the upper cannon just in case, Grandfather Leo piloted the dirigible—with its full complement of warm air restoring—back into the stormy cloud and joined the other family aircraft. Its dampness soaked Rho's clothing, and the turbulence jostled everyone and everything around, but everyone was okay. They kept close formation for the hours until dim-darkness and then ventured above into the clear air. No algolim in sight now and they rose higher until they caught a high stream that put them at enough distance from the attack location that they could relax. The algolim likely could not guess their direction.

Saiph and Leo spoke privately to Mirfak, both saying, "If you are to carry our radar, you need to be more alert, and accurate in your warnings."

Once the altitude had been set and no changes needed to be made anytime soon, and the air was calm (though of course always moving), the three dirigibles maneuvered together by means of electric power to their propellers, augmented slightly by brute pedaling, and steered by vents and rudimentary rudders. The young people tossed ropes between the crafts and pulled them together, lashing them into one larger raft. Since the gondolas were slung below the much larger envelopes, they also rigged rope bridges between gondolas, so people could cross back and forth conveniently. Hopefully, if the weather cooperated—and their forecasts predicted it would—they could remain together until they reached the gathering point in the southern latitudes for the Annuary, with plans as always to stop to harvest eiderdown.

Chapter 2 Endnotes

The algolim are named for the star Algol, which is in within the constellation Perseus. Ancient legend is that the character Algol, meaning in Arabic "ghoul", represents the snake-haired head of the monster Medusa, who could turn anyone who gazed on her into stone. Perseus, who is known for his flying horse Pegasus, reportedly cut off Medusa's head. The star Algol, the so-called "demon star" is a variable binary star, that is, two stars that orbit around each other, one brighter than the other, thus making its brightness change as viewed from Earth. Some of the people say "angolim," instead of the more standard term, algolim.

People developed drones for exploration and defense many centuries ago, but as radio was necessary for accurately controlling the drones, radio just as easily could disable and crash them. The people were skilled enough with radio to defeat them, and this being common knowledge and technology, nobody bothered building drones anymore.

Independence Gold Mine, Summer 2024

Three

Circumnavigation

Rho was kneeling on the topside platform of his family dirigible and scraping fat from the ursus hide with vigorous energy. His brother, Deneb, a leather cloth wrapped around one arm, was standing away at some distance and looking out over the jagged rocky land gliding along below. A body of calm water lay to the south.

"What will you do with that thing?" Deneb called out, still gazing over the plain.

"It's a wedding gift for Lyra," Rho yelled back. Once it's cured, mother said she'll line it with silk to make her a robe. Maybe a blanket."

"Too big and heavy," Deneb said. "Ugly. Smells bad."

"But it will amaze her and her father."

"That it will, brother. But I'm creating a present for her that weighs nothing and will be equally amazing. And much more impressive."

"What is it?"

Just then a sharp flurry of feathers zoomed toward Deneb and he braced himself and held out his arm. A gyrofel alighted on the wide leather wrist band, dangling a killed lagopus in its talons. The gyrofel hopped up and down on the uncertain footing, trying to keep balanced. Deneb gave the hunting bird a strip of raw ursus flesh, which it gobbled gratefully, then he gently removed the prey and tossed it into a basket.

"That's fourteen," Deneb said. "Enough for a meal."

"You won't tell me what the gift is?"

Deneb shook his head, and a movement below caught his eye. He launched the bird.

"Hello, hello," a voice called from over the edge. The grinning face of cousin Chertan appeared at the top of the ladder. The more serious face of Chort followed.

"Amazing," Chertan said. He grunted as he lifted up

one side of the pelt. “This must weigh 50 kilos. You should toss it over the side. Your mother says the meal will be ready soon.” The cousins flopped down on the platform. They were non-identical twins, and they couldn’t have had more different temperaments. Chort, methodical. Chertan, spontaneous.

Rho continued working on the hide, and Deneb, with another lagopus in his basket, joined them. He stroked the gyrfal’s neck.

“We survived a pirate attack,” Cousin Chertan said with a smug, satisfied expression. “An excellent tale for the storytellers.”

“Doesn’t it make you wonder,” Chort said, “How, if we’re so noble, how could our people desert our way and become vicious criminals, like the pirates?”

“That was over a 100 years ago,” Deneb said. “We’ve become better since then.”

“They are no better than the insan-hayawan,” Chertan said. “They’re worse because they attack our homes. At least hayawan can’t fly.”

“I don’t think human nature ever changes,” Chort said. “We all have that potential. Even the hayawan were once noble. You’ve read the history.”

“It’s hard to believe,” Deneb said.

Rho quietly said, “I saw the pirates’ frightened faces up close when they fell passed us, and they look like those of our own people. Maybe just a little fiercer.”

“Not only do the algolim attack and steal from us,” Chertan said, “they loot, rape, and pillage the insan-hayawan. Some stories tell that they kidnap their hideous females.”

“Disgusting,” the twins and Deneb said together in harmony, but Rho had not chimed in.

Quiet, private thoughts followed the group commentary until the dinner bell rang from below. As the others took their turns descending to the dining compartment, Rho fastened the pelt with the fur side down onto the deck and followed them, wondering that if his people were wrong about the hayawan women, what else was wrong in their beliefs?

When Rho reached the hot and crowded compartment, his mother and aunt were putting away their mending and stitching. Having just finished processing the bulk of the tarandus harvest, it was a special occasion, and for it the older men had prepared the meal of fresh roasted tenderloin, and a kelp and rice casserole, while the cousins served. Dried wild strawberries were for dessert. Rho and Deneb would clean up, and then after a nap, dress the lagopus for another time, careful to save the precious skin and feathers. Afterwards Rho planned to continue denaturing the giant ursus skull.

"What are you doing?" Rho asked Deneb.

Deneb grabbed the server screen and jerked it around out of Rho's view.

"Another secret, I see."

Deneb said nothing, but only waited for Rho to leave.

"I'm the one getting married, not you. You're not trying to steal Lyra, are you, with your present?"

Deneb's face flushed and he stood up and clamped the server cover shut. "Just because you were lucky enough to be drawn in the lottery doesn't mean I don't have feelings. I'm never going have a wife because there aren't enough girls. Only one son per family can marry, if even that."

"Sorry Deneb, I was joking. Sorry. Really I am." He paused as he let Deneb consider his own desolate thoughts. Then he said, "Father says to get ready for the eiderdown collection. He wants you to inflate the waterraft."

After the tarandus hunt, the flight had traveled for a week over a vast inland pocked with thousands of lakes and ponds. Then they flew over a body of sea, and crossed an island, finally settling onto the edge of a wide grassy plain beside a large seawater inlet. Frozen mountains loomed to the southeast, and in their midst black cones and stretches of ash and cinders from which currently shot fire geysers and plumes of steam from the fresh volcanic activity. At night patches of

the black land glowed orange. Once they watched a fiery river pour down a mountainside into the water below and sending up clouds of steam. They anchored the coupled dirigibles well away into the old, vegetation-covered mud flats and set out to search for eider nests.

The wind was calm and the sky partly cloudy. Rho and Deneb took a skin waterraft and paddled to another section of the inlet, as did Chertan and Chort in another raft. When Rho found nests hidden in the low brush, each usually had three or four eggs in it. This first nest held five. He carefully set the eggs aside and gathered up a portion of the nesting material that was comprised of both the brown and black down and grass. Rho put the material into a cloth bag and replaced it with dry grass that his mother had gathered earlier. Then he replaced the eggs, except for one. He cupped it in his hands and held it up to the sun to see if it was still undeveloped, then he cracked and ate it raw.

The family group worked this section along the inlet, then they pulled up anchors and floated to another place several kilometers away. Their family had held the rights to collect here in this region since the people had decided hundreds of years ago that eiderdown would be their medium of currency. Eiderdown was what gold had been before the Great Chaos. When they had more than enough to exchange for the next year's supplies and extra for the brideprice, everyone pitched in on fluffing, cleaning in special machines, and grading the down. They saw neither insan-hayawan or algolim, the latter who often visited this region being too lazy and undisciplined for the work, and besides they had no interest in trading fair. They would steal eiderdown or whatever else they needed if they could.

From their location at the eiderdown coastal plains, the voyage to the coordinates for the huge Annuary gathering would require a month of travel with the three dirigibles lashed

together, and depending upon some precise, complicated maneuvering. They first found a northern jet stream and followed it to the proper longitude and then worked their way south across the Pacific with appropriate lower altitude winds. At some point they crossed the equator. During the first part of their journey, they were drifting as high as 14,000 meters; the cabins had been pressurized and the internal atmosphere augmented with oxygen. Rho settled into a routine of zoological study, chores, naps whenever he felt sleepy, and listening to stories and talking with Lyra when weather conditions around the globe—in the ionosphere especially—permitted long-distance short-wave. Communication with her had been spotty. Her family's flight had begun their navigation toward the gathering position from somewhere over middle Africa. Since her storyteller subcaste seldom if ever needed to touch down on the surface except in a potable water emergency, and merchants intercepted them with supplies, they more or less drifted at random, only maneuvering to hunt easy weather.

If anything, Lyra's health had deteriorated, which further hampered communication. "My anemia is worsening," she said once in a serene, musical voice. "I look forward to seeing new physicians at the gathering, but to our wedding much more."

Rho occasionally donned an oxygen kit and a puffy down overcoat and ventured to the dirigible's top. At this altitude without a heated pressure suit he could safely elude hypothermia for 18 minutes at a time, but there he could gaze out over the cloudscape flowing below, and at night straight into the brilliant heavens—the cosmos—with the band of the Milky Way blazing intensely. Meteors would cruise by here and there. One time when there was no moon up yet, a fiery piece of ancient junk—a satellite whose orbit had finally decayed enough to bring it down—passed close by. As a kind of prayer, he'd find each of the stars and constellations that his loved ones were named after, especially Vega in Lyra the Harp, and he desperately hoped that his Lyra would reach the

gathering, be healed, and live. During these short minutes he absorbed the calm of the celestial beacons radiating through the dark, incomprehensible vastness. Sometimes Grandpa Leo would join him and they'd sit together in companionable silence.

Once they reached the low southern Pacific trade winds when he didn't need a pressure suit or supplemental oxygen to work outside, Rho refitted his glider with long, high altitude wings. Their family flight would arrive past the middle of the Annuary gathering and he wanted his glider to be ready. Deneb fished over the side when the sea below was quiet and he could persuade his father and uncles to fly low enough, and he continued furtively working on his secret gift on a server.

"Rho, Rho, wake up." Chort was shaking him. He had crawled into the cockpit of his glider and fallen asleep. Overhead, lights in the night sky flickered and swirled with rushing, cascading streams of green and pink.

"Ah, the southern aurora, fabulous!" Rho said and rubbed his eyes. "I always love watching it in winter, if we linger. But it's spring here." He climbed out of the glider.

"No, I don't mean the aurora," Chort said with impatience. He pointed and said, "Look there, two points off the starboard bow. Look lower."

Still sleepy, Rho was fuzzy about direction, and the dirigibles didn't really have bow and stern except when using the propellers, but he followed the line extending from Chort's finger to see a faint glow on the eastern horizon.

"Here, look." Chort handed him binoculars.

"I see now, the gathering Island!"

"Sorry to wake you, but I thought you'd want to see the approach. So many flights will be arriving now."

"I do. Thanks." He shivered. "I didn't mean to stay out here. Sleep just overtook me."

"Here's food and an eiderdown robe. Chertan and Deneb are coming up."

Now that they had achieved a visual sighting, the older men sent up small balloons to find the fastest air, which they needed to overtake the growing Island of linked flights and aircraft units. They brought their lashed-together flight group higher to reach an air current moving nearly in the right direction. The sun was beginning to soften the darkness in the northeast. The sight that the young men beheld was for them the most welcome and exciting of the year. Hundreds and hundreds of dirigibles, some higher, some lower, their camouflage switched off and all lit up with one or all of every color of the rainbow, and every pattern imaginable, all converging upon a single point that seemed to grow larger every moment. And each aircraft or linked dirigibles with all their propellers whizzing like bees, because if they missed the rendezvous even by a few extra meters and had too much headwind, they couldn't join the gathering again until the following year. It sometimes happened.

Rho, Chort, and Chertan took turns pedaling the propellers, two on the seats and one resting. Even Uncle Mirfak stood by to spell the young men. Saiph manned the wheel that controlled the rudder. Deneb was nowhere to be seen. Grandpa Leo just hung about, always holding on to something, smiling to himself and not inclined to help. He'd seen it all before.

Their flight struggled to keep the Island directly in their heading; some drag in their configuration pulled them to port. The men at the pedals worked frantically, and they were beginning to fatigue. Still, the flight seemed to not be turning.

"Where's Deneb?" Chertan said angrily. Just then the missing cousin ran up and pushed Chertan from the seat.

"Where have you been?" Chertan said between gasps and as Deneb jumped into the vacated seat and began pedaling like mad.

Because of the trickiness of their maneuvers, no one in the flight seemed to have had time to spare for thinking about

illuminating their lights. Not only that, but what electricity could be spared for lighting up was augmenting the pedalers. Theirs was one of the few coming in dark.

"Anytime now," Deneb said.

The surfaces of the three dirigibles began flickering.

"What?" the other three men said together. The women at the rails cried out in surprise as the massive envelopes lit up above them and the lights began pulsing. Not one color but all colors in dozens of variations, checks, swirls, pools, circles, triangles, kaleidoscoping into one other, with never a repetition.

Chert gave a shove to Deneb that almost knocked him over. "Are you crazy?"

"It's his wedding present to Lyra," Rho said through his panting. He's been working on this for months."

"You haven't seen the best part yet."

Chertan, Chort and Uncle Rasalas stepped out to the balcony and peered up at the envelopes. "There are words in black," Chort said, "and they're rolling and snaking all over the surface. Hard to see from here."

"They say, 'We love you, Lyra," Deneb said flatly.

"You are crazy, Deneb, said Chort. "Funny we'll look if we miss docking because of your stunt."

"We won't miss it," Deneb said, panting and falling over exhausted to make room for Chertan.

Just then explosions booming all around them were followed by streams of orange-red fire arcing in every direction away from their aircraft. Fireworks!

"Deneb!" everyone shouted.

"Don't blame me. Grandpa Leo. He told me not to tell anyone."

"We've made an impression!" Saiph yelled, his booming voice carrying from where he stood at the con. Those who had liberty to look saw other flights that were still on approach attempt to imitate Deneb and Leo's show. Some of them flashed messages of congratulations, in Morse code—the best they could do with short notice.

"Turn out the lights now!" Saiph commanded.

Everyone knew that the time for horseplay was over. The Island drew near and their position was still far to port. Rho climbed to the top first to study their configuration.

He methodically glanced from section to section.

Everything looked trim, but his glider . . . his glider with its immense high altitude wings was anchored at a slight cant to the meridian of the three lashed-together dirigibles and causing the drag. If he couldn't straighten them, they would miss the Island entirely, even with all their pedaling. But there was no one to hold it down while he unfastened it and made the adjustment. Everyone was committed to vital tasks. Maybe his mother… No, there wasn't time.

He only had one option. He ran to the glider and pulled all of the releases. As the glider began slipping backwards, he grabbed hold and shoved forward with all his might. If the aircraft slid off the back, he could damage the dirigible's antennas, as well as foul the rigging. The glider inched forward until it hit the downward curve of the envelope, then it picked up speed sliding on its skids. Rho jumped onto a foot peg and slid the cockpit open. He struggled inside just as the aircraft plunged over the edge. With both hands, he jammed the cover closed, locked it, and took the controls. He was plummeting straight down toward the ocean.

"Ahhh," he said, and pulled the yoke back until the glider leveled.

He circled around until he found an updraft rising from a green-covered volcanic cone below. It would be enough, he thought. He climbed up and up within the column of air until the floating Island of aircraft was below him. He could see that his flight had adjusted its course. It now had a chance. But then horrified, he watched it slowly slip passed the Island. He saw some of his family members standing helplessly. One of them threw up his arms in frustration.

At least I'll make the wedding, if no one else does, he thought. But what was this? Chort and Chertan had launched their gliders, too. They're insane. They should be pedaling.

But then he saw. Apparently, Chort, Chertan or both had dropped lines to an aircraft moored on the outside edge of the Island and now their flight was swinging out in a curve in front. Now, he looked to his cousins below. They had found the same air column he did and they fought to climb. It was risky soaring this far away from a mountain range where any uplifting columns of air were unreliable and one couldn't land on the surface in an emergency, but this made it all the more thrilling.

He was grinning so hard his face was cramping.

He looked down again at the drifting Island of assembled craft, hundreds of them. His family's flight was illuminated again as they winched it in, and the sky was still dark enough to see its brilliant fluorescent green.

Scrolling across the surfaces were the names Rho & Lyra within a red heart.

Note: Holding an egg up to the sun, or a light, to see what's inside is called "candling."

Boarding Aleutian Airways, Anchorage, Summer 2024

Sanguisorba sitchensis, Hatcher Pass 2024

Unalaska

Four

End of Hope

The glider venture was short-lived. Rho ascertained that the updraft was localized to the green volcanic land-island, which would not be there for long, but after his cousins joined him, they managed one complete sweep around the floating sky-Island. They flew in formation, wingtip to wingtip, Rho with his long, high-altitude wings in the middle, and they swooped around as close as they dared, which amounted to mere meters and just avoiding collision with two or three incoming flights. As the Gathering Island drifted away from the volcanic cone and its rising air, he and his cousins climbed up again just enough to force-land on a top deck of the Island, in its middle; otherwise they would have had to ditch in the ocean.

Word that one of the grooms had arrived in such spectacular fashion traveled word-of-mouth throughout the Island faster than radio waves. Rho, Chertan, and Chort tried not to strut as they passed through the malls and commons that had been created out of several of the floating manufacturing plants. To the young men's surprise, people greeted them somberly as they went, some who were relatives, others they barely remembered, and some they didn't know at all—people who rarely came to gatherings. The normal festive atmosphere of the gathering was strangely absent. Alcoves featuring varied merchandise lined the thoroughfare. The young men peeked into the auditorium where the marriages would be commemorated toward the end of the gathering. Though many flights had not joined the Island yet, the hall was three-quarters full of people listening to a mournful story being read. This was unusual. There would be time to look into that later. The men needed to return to their flight to be present for the eiderdown inspection and weighing.

"Here you are, here you are," an old woman said as she followed the young men from the auditorium. She had been crying. "Rho, I'm so sorry for you, so sorry," she said. "Here,

please take this." She gave Rho a small bag, and before he could ask what the matter was, she turned and trotted back into the auditorium. Inside the bag was a lump of soft candy. Rho pulled it into three pieces and shared it around. It was made of honey and ground up sesame seeds.

"Yum. Delicious," Chertan said. "Why the sad faces?"

Rho felt uneasy. "Why has nobody told us what happened?"

"We should save some candy for Deneb," Chort said.

By the time they arrived where their flight had docked, the inspection had already begun. Everyone there was moving so slowly, and when Rho scrambled across to their dirigible, work came to a standstill. His father and mother, standing together, greeted him; then his father said, "We need to talk in private."

Rho trembled as they stepped into his parents' private quarters. He sat on a thin cushion in a corner and they sat side-by-side on their bunk.

"Lyra is dying," his father said. "She has the illness killing our people, killing the young women. We hoped it was something else, and only a few doctors among our people can diagnose it with certainty, so we didn't speak our fears until now, when they knew." He paused to let the news sink in.

Rho remained silent for a long while. He too had suspected all along why she was ill, but he refused to admit what her trouble might be, refused to allow himself to think about it. The implications for him were devastating. But more than that, he was sad for her. He swallowed and waited until he could trust his voice, then he said, "I want to see her."

"Yes," his mother said. "We must go now. There isn't time to clean up or change clothes."

Chertan and Chort stayed behind to assist with the inspection, which was essential for Annuary business to proceed, and Rho, Saiph, and Vela left for the hospital wards. They hurried along, Rho in front—sorrowful and afraid—and his parents behind. People turned to nod as they passed.

A woman in a beige silk costume greeted them at the

entrance to the wards and led them into Lyra's compartment. Two of her brothers stood up when they entered. Rho nodded to them and sat on Lyra's wide, comfortable hospital cot. Her skin was pale, almost translucent, and she stared ahead without expression, her face and eyes gaunt. Her arm outside the covers was thin and bony. Rho couldn't speak.

In shock at the contrast between what he was seeing and the vibrant and supple person he loved and had become engaged to marry at last year's gathering, he was now as much horrified and repelled as sad

"Lyra, it's your husband-to-be." One of her brothers said. "He's arrived."

She turned her head and looked at Rho without any interest. Rho reached over and patted her head, her hair wispy like that of an elderly person. He stroked her cheek with his finger. When the frigid hardness in her face softened and she smiled with recognition and said in the voice he loved, "There you are," the shell of her frailty faded into the background.

Rho's parents each approached the cot, and bent to kiss her on the cheek, and then they left the compartment. Lyra's brothers touched Rho on his arm and followed them out. Rho and Lyra were alone. Tears flowed down her thin cheeks. "I'm sorry I got sick," she said in a hoarse whisper. "Sorry I can't live with you and give you children. You are so strong and healthy. I'm so cold."

Rho glanced over his shoulder at the curtained doorway and then lifted up her covering quilt and snuggled up against her wasted body. She felt hard and bony. She sighed and closed her eyes, and a faint color entered her cheeks. He brushed hair from her forehead and kissed her there.

"I love you," she said.

"And I love you."

When he woke 20 minutes later, they were still alone in the room.

"Lyra?" he said.

She didn't answer. He repeated her name, and still no answer. Her body was warm now, but he knew it was only

from his own warmth under the eiderdown cover. He was antsy and wanted to jump up and move around, and he was nervous about people walking in. He knew that if he left her she would chill, and death would soon follow, so he stayed, hoping that she still might turn around. People passed in and out of the room. Someone brought a fragrant dried flower arrangement. Others brought food and wine. Grandpa Leo came in, touched him on the shoulder and sat down for awhile and then left without a word. He had been a widower for many years. Musicians played music in the corridor outside the compartment. Rho stayed a long time like this under the covers with her to keep her warm. Deneb lugged in the ursus blanket and spread it on the floor. “Put it at our feet,” Rho said to him. She was breathing slowly, barely detectable.

As Rho felt the next sleep cycle attempting to smother him, and his consciousness momentarily faded, he realized she had stopped breathing. He rose up from the cot and waited for several minutes. She didn’t change. She looked withered and old, but with the face of a young woman. He was hungry and ate some of the tasteless food. He took a long drink of wine from their borrowed wedding chalice that he just then noticed, and left the compartment. Mercifully, no one was waiting for him there outside. Grateful to be moving, he walked fast to where his family’s flight had moored at the edge of the Island, passed among the inquiring faces of his relatives, took a shower, and climbed up to his glider.

He looked out to the west. The Andes Mountains would soon be in view.

Rho moved through his chores, meals, and the trading for supplies with the dull, sick feeling one has when deprived of sleep. Only he wasn’t sleepy anymore, and no relief was possible. And it wasn’t him only. He might not have cared about life now, but he couldn’t help but notice that everyone around him probably felt the same as he did. For others who

were not family this was not so much a personal loss, as a loss to all their people. This was no cheerful gathering for anyone. Lyra's death was like the final sign that a dirigible was caught in a storm pattern from which there was no escape and no chance of survival. A tight upward spiraling column with a devastating cold downdraft at its core that would tear a dirigible into shreds. It was rare when a dirigible was caught by such a funnel, but now, everyone was caught.

The debates that had begun when the family had been on the tarandus hunt in the north resumed at the auditorium, and from what Rho heard about them in passing, nothing new emerged. No one had any solutions, at least none that the elders seemed inclined to approve. At Lyra's funeral taking place in the screened gardens on the topside of the Island, friends of her family played some exquisite music all the more painful because of its beauty. Rho slipped away before the funeral ended and returned to his moored flight. He couldn't possibly be comforted by anything his or her family could say to him. Least of all did he want to hear from strangers.

He carried two bundles to the top of their dirigible and stowed them aboard his glider. It was almost ready now for the mountains. As he ran through the equipment checklist, he heard the horns, the mournful harmonic sound announcing that Lyra's weighted body was plunging toward the ocean below.

Oxygen canisters, water, pressure suit, radio, emergency parachute that he would wear—the ordinary items. He wasn't exactly conscious of why he was taking an emergency land kit including knives, an e-m rifle, and cooking utensils, but he did. He already knew that the glider was otherwise perfectly ready, so skipping the ladder, he slid down supporting ropes to the body of the dirigible to be there before his family would arrive.

His mother came in first.

"I brought you some food. People were generous. There's a special fish soup I think you'll like and fresh fruit—maybe you haven't had this kind before."

Rho ate quickly without tasting. Everyone including

him settled down for a nap. Rho woke early. As the gathering was beginning to wind down to a close, the weddings that had been planned were to take place next, but Rho wouldn't attend. He clipped a note onto the dining table where his mother was sure to see it when she came in, and he climbed on top. Chort was there waiting for him.

"Chertan and I will launch as soon as the weddings are over," Chort said.

Rho was looking below at the mountains before them. "I think we'll have a chance to reach the vortex this time.

"Maybe you a better chance than the rest."

"Or, worse," Rho said.

"Are you sure you want to launch now? It's dangerous flying alone. I don't think you should go."

"Are you going to help me?"

"Who'll see you if you are alone and go down? And who will pick you up?"

Rho shrugged his shoulders, but then struggled into his pressure suit and pulled himself into the cockpit. Chort helped him close and seal the canopy. Rho gave him a thumbs-up and Chort undid the remaining tie-downs and shoved the glider over the side. It spiraled down away, slowly leveled in a long arc, and then began to rise.

Chort watched a while, shook his head at the foolish, but understandable venture, and then climbed down.

Rho wasn't certain what he was doing, launching alone, leaving his family behind. He hadn't ever done anything like it before. Sure, his cousins and many other young men would be following him in a few hours, but he had never been separated for even that long and never by such a distance as he was likely to travel. All he knew was that he couldn't live life again as he had before. He couldn't go through the motions of the people's way of life and find any meaning. His people had left the crowded, violent surface centuries ago so they could

survive, and now it was clear to him personally that their continued survival in the air so isolated from the surface was not possible.

Before long he had reached the edge of the continent and the endless line of mountains that stretched from left to right only a short distance from the ocean. Still with plenty of altitude, he caught the uplift at the mountainous front and turned up and up until the uplift weakened. Once he tired of this he glided south losing only a little altitude until he found another strong uplift and circled up again. He was following a wave of air lifting over the range until, as he hoped, he was far enough south to find the polar vortex, a frigid stream of air that rushed around the south pole. He was high now and the cockpit was growing colder. He turned on the heater and soon was comfortable again. It was time to seal the helmet of his pressure suit, and after this his vision was restricted, but he could make out the end of the mountain range ahead. He found the rising part of the wave again and climbed so fast that he felt dizzy. This was unusual. The normal approach was to turn east and cross over. If the bump of air that rebounded from the mountains on the eastern side of the range was strong enough, and if the winds were fast enough, a pilot might actually be able to climb into the vortex, if it was really there. It shifted around and no one could predict its location. It had been a long time since anyone had reached it, over two dozen years.

His radio faintly squawked and he turned up the volume inside his helmet.

"How are you, cousin?" It was Chertan.

"What do you think?" Rho said.

"Where are you then?"

"I'm about to make a run for it?"

"The vortex? Already?"

"What do you think? I'm attempting the front wave."

"You're not serious. You should wait for us. We've got it timed so we can get picked up if we go astray. The winds are strong. If you actually get into the vortex in that

location, no telling where you'll end up."

"The climb seems like it will never quit. I'm going to stay with it."

"Really, Rho, you should wait. You know, your parents are upset you left alone. So upset that they can't talk with you now. Your father would only yell and say how foolish you are. I'm supposed to talk you back."

Rho did not reply.

"Okay, cousin. I know you heard me."

If Rho's glider had stopped climbing, he would have dropped down and waited back and forth along the ridges for the others, but it didn't stop. His rate of ascent slowed, but he was still gaining. He was now amidst cloud formations that he had only seen from below, and then without warning the glider heeled over, slammed by a cross blast of wind. The vortex. Before he could find the horizon and right himself, the glider stopped flying and started into a nose dive and, heart pounding, he applied the subtle corrections to pull out of it without ripping off his wings. He circled around to the bump again and climbed back up, and this time he was ready. He gently turned in with the direction of the vortex. He knew he was now flying faster than he had ever done before, but the signs were subtle—the bumps felt different. Actual airspeed was minimal and the ground, too far below to get a read.

"Chertan," Rho called on the radio.

"Here," came the reply.

"And I'm here too," said Chort's voice.

"I'm in the vortex."

Silence on the other end.

"What's it like, son?" This was his father. He had been listening all along.

"Rough. I'm climbing higher. I will climb higher than anyone else has."

"Son, you should drop down now. I've tried to chart the winds, and if the vortex is there, you have less than 10 minutes before you will be out of reach. We won't be able to pick you up."

Rho was angry. His father had broken the unspoken rule that no one was to question young men when they were soaring, especially during the Annuary gathering. The people always lived with uncertainty and dependence upon the forces of nature. The risks of their way of life were normal. They had adapted to being perpetual nomads, and the annual soaring was a way for the young men to assert their independence, but more importantly, it established their relationship to creation, to learn that they would be cared for. It was fine for a cousin of his own age to warn him, but from his father, it was deeply insulting. He felt embarrassed and betrayed, especially since others were listening.

He turned off his radio.

By now Rho's glider was so high that he felt detached from everything except his aircraft and his small compartment. His legs were beginning to tingle from inaction, or was it the cold? Far from the exaltation of being free and soaring high over the world, high over his normal world which itself was already apart from the surface and the origin of his people, he began to feel claustrophobic. Though it was still day, the sky above was black, and he could see the stars. His altimeter said 30,478 meters, but it might be frozen. He could be much higher. He pulled his hand from a glove and put it bare on the instrument to try to warm it. Nothing changed until he left his numbing hand on it for a long time, and then it moved. It now said 28,040. He was dropping already.

He switched the radio back on and it immediately squawked. "Well, Rho, what's happening now? Where are you?" This time it was Chort, but his voice was breaking up.

Rho told him his altitude. He didn't mention what it had been.

"That's a record, cousin. We've refitted the wings, launched our sailplanes, and I'm afraid we're to your north and east already. Nobody even got close to the vortex. We are cutting further north to reconnect with the Island. When our flight breaks off from the assembled craft, we'll circumnavigate and pick you up. You find a safe place to wait

for us, okay? It will be about a month."

"I reached 30,478 meters, Chort. 30,478. I can't wait on the surface here at this latitude; it's too cold without extra gear. If I can't meet with you now, I'll head along the mountain range and go as far north as possible."

"Are you there, Rho? I'm not getting a signal." Chort couldn't hear him anymore; his batteries must be stronger but not strong enough to pick up Rho's weaker transmission. They must be moving out of range of the less powerful radios that the gliders carried. My batteries were used keeping me warm, Rho thought. Chort's last words were a mere broken rumble, and Rho heard nothing more from him.

Rho dropped from the vortex without incident and turned to the Northwest. He expected he had enough altitude to return to the western edge of the mountain range to pick up the ordinary prevailing bump. Some hours later he had dropped far enough to remove his helmet, and now he could eat. He was ravenous, and before long the energy from dried fruit and tarandus warmed his feet. They hurt now, and he hoped he hadn't gotten frostbite. Whatever was happening with them, it was a relief to be back at a familiar altitude. He continued to soar north, alternating between climbing and gliding, climbing and gliding. While it was still too deep into southern latitudes for him to wait comfortably, he needed to land to move around and hopefully take care of his feet. It just wasn't possible to remain in the cockpit for the hours and days required to travel north far enough for the miles he needed.

His body ached all over now. On top of that, he had to sleep. He was already fading in and out of consciousness. This was not safe at all because if he fell asleep he could crash. He angled west to look for a place where he could set down, catch a nap and possibly launch again. The safest situation would be at the edge of a cliff, but those didn't offer the best landing surfaces.

He had an idea, but he never heard of anyone doing this before. As he looked down to his right, he kept seeing the steepest places on the mountains, and the most likely relaunch

spots were at their tops, above the bergshrunds at the start of the glaciers before the snow was deep enough to collapse by its own pressure into solid ice. He was coming up on a mountain that wasn't too high, and he circled around. The wind was too strong here to land—it was the wind that was giving him all this lift.

Perhaps he could try on the leeward side on that long scree hump that had only a little slope to it on the top. He began his descent and the mountain grew closer. He dropped his skids and touched down. The glider jostled along in the gravel but didn't stop. There wasn't enough friction, plus the wind was pushing him forward. He wished he had installed an ice brake, but it was too late for that now. There was nothing to do but slide off the edge of the bergshrund ahead, gain some altitude, and continue north.

He dropped over the side, found a bit of lift, but there was a problem. Ice and snow make for air sinks, so he was being pushed down. He was well below the summits of the highest mountains around him and being pushed back into them. His only option was to turn into the wind and hope to ride over the crests rather than crash into them. He turned as sharply as he dared and headed up the ravine he was in. He kept dropping as the saddle drew near. It would be close. He was now mere meters above the surface. Below him was gravel, boulders and snow patches. His skids touched down and he slid. Right ahead of him the ground vanished. The glider dropped over the cliff which was covered in ice—an icefall. Rho's mind was numb now from lack of sleep and he reacted only by instinct and training. He just managed to level his wings and catch an up-push of air over a rocky expanse. And he was clear. He circled up and up and moved east again until he reached the upward roll of the airwave. He climbed again, set the glider due north and, with his altimeter chirping an even tone, slightly diminishing, he fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes 16 minutes later, far short of his normal sleep period, the out-of-focus dirigibles in view confused him. One loomed overhead and several more floated on either side. He would not have been surprised to find a mountain wall directly in front of him or even his glider in ruins and he sprawled on the ground, bloody and half dead, but a group of dirigibles?

For an instant he thought maybe the past day had been a dream he had while napping in his moored glider, and somehow he was still with his family, but the next instant his aircraft's nose lifted, he felt g's pushing him back hard, and he was pointing straight up toward the heavens. The dirigible that had been so near, was now overhead.

His muscles under his safety straps and his neck hurt. All the alarms in his cabin screamed. He was swinging up. At the top of the swing, he fell backwards and dropped straight down and then he was mashed into his seat, the glider's wings' shoulders groaning so much that the wings might fall off. The glider bounced up and down with diminishing distances until he came to a dead stop, nose up and staring up at the bottom of the dirigible's living quarters. People were looking down at him and smiling and laughing, but not nice laughs. Only then did he realize what had happened. He had blindly flown into a nest of pirates and they had netted him out of the air. Now they were reeling him up on a boom.

But Rho was not willing to give up. The pirates would torture him for information and then throw him over the side.

He unlocked the canopy, unsnapped his straps, and with a knife cut through the net's cords that he could reach, and this allowed him to reach more cords. He was now almost parallel with their deck. Two pirates with hooked poles were pulling him in now while others pointed e-m rifles at him. The hooks had grabbed the netting which, unknown to his captors, was no longer holding him firmly.

The glider slipped out, fell a dozen meters and was caught only by a few cords. Rho was able to cut one more and then the others snapped, sending him twisting away tail first,

the loose canopy banging open and shut.

Rho had never trained to recover flight from such a situation, and because of the damage to the wings it probably wouldn't have helped anyway. His mind raced for a solution to save his glider. Could he wait for it to point down on its own and then fly again? When the canopy suddenly ripped off, he decided. He grabbed his knife and a food bag, unfastened a final belt, and pushed off. A steep slope of the surface being only a hundred meters below, he didn't wait to pull the cord to his gliding-chute. As the chute deployed, he watched as a wing broke off and his beloved glider spun crazily away, becoming smaller until it disappeared into the mountain shadows without a sound.

***Note**: "Envelope" refers to the inflated part of the balloon or dirigible. "Canopy" refers to the transparent cover of a glider's cockpit.

Shaishnikof Cemetery, Unalaska, Summer 2024

***Castilleja unalaschcensis*, Unalaska, Summer 2024**

Start of the Ballyhoo Mountain Run, Unalaska, Summer 2024

Five

Challenged Beliefs

With his glider chute's superior maneuverability, the pirates could not follow him fast enough to visually track his vector, if they could follow at all, with the air currents being what they were. And if they could see him—the fabric of the chute was the same as the skin of his people's dirigibles, with camouflage adjusted to their environment and able to collect solar energy when connected to a battery. He wouldn't show up on radar because his signature was insignificant. He turned east and then wound around a mountain and glided back west again. This would take him higher into the mountains, but if he was to survive, he had to find his wrecked glider.

That ahead could be the ravine it dropped into, he thought. He passed over to be sure, and he could see the natural, uncamouflaged white of the separated wings below on a rock slope, the wings sharp like icicles.

When he touched down a few meters from the wreckage, he collected the chute's fabric and condensed, rolled, and tied it into a bundle. It could serve as a tent later. He took a few steps toward the wreckage and stopped. The world was spinning around his head and rocking back and forth. If he hadn't dropped to the ground he would have fallen. It was not an earthquake as he thought—it was vertigo and hunger. And his feet hurt from having been so cold.

He sat a long time without moving. Though he was in shadow of the mountains that lay to the west, and though it was early spring, he felt warm enough. The breeze lifting from the river below was cool, but there was no hard wind. He drank some water from a rivulet and ate from the rations of dried tarandus and vegetables. He mixed some dried potato powder into water for a slurry and drank it down. No dried fruit for now—he'd save it to cheer himself up later.

It took an hour at least to find his e-m gun at the edge of the river far below the glider. It had landed on the slope and

slid down a hundred meters. The damage initially appeared to be mostly cosmetic, but possibly the circuitry was cracked in multiple places. The battery's seals were broken. There was no possibility it would fire. He searched among the glider wreckage in case he had stowed a repair kit and parts aboard that he had forgotten about, but if he had, it was not to be found. After this, he took off his pressure suit, slit ventilation holes into it at strategic places, put it back on, wrapped himself in the emergency eiderdown blanket and went to sleep lying on the mossy but still hard rocks. Two hours later he awoke and it was dark.

It was a long night. Because they being often in constant motion, drifting west to east, his people had long ago lost their day-night circadian rhythm, so Rho was accustomed to being awake in the dark. But he had never spent overnight on the ground. Two hours was the longest he had ever slept at a time in his life, and the last time was as a child. More sleep was not possible now. He just sat there wrapped in his blanket and listened to the river below and the breezes all around until his bottom became numb and he was forced to change positions. Eventually he got up to find a grassy tuft to sit on. He didn't want to think about how stupid he had been flying off and getting stranded, or how it didn't matter anyway, so he tried to let his mind go blank, to listen and be a passive, impassive observer of the subdued world around him. Some rocks clattered down the steep slope to his left and he wondered what predators lived in the land. No doubt lepardus or puma. He stumbled around for a few minutes to collect a dozen good throwing rocks. He wasn't afraid, but he decided that he had better not sleep. The effort to concentrate took his mind off his troubles and had the opposite effect of intentions, because just as the stars began to dim in the east, his head leaned forward and he was asleep with a rock in his hand.

The light winds had died down, Rho noted later on from his partly awake condition, his eyes still closed. He felt the ground below him, heaving, bouncing, and rolling—the usual

lingering effect of being stationary when those motions were a constant. Rocks clattered down again. Opening his eyes and turning to throw a rock came in one motion. He hadn't expected to see a threat. At most maybe a hydrochoerus, what some called a cavybara. Not likely, but maybe a dangerous puma. What stood near him, only a few meters away frightened him more than anything—a human being, a pirate with an e-m rifle pointing at him. Rho jumped up and looked for a path of escape, but pirates were surrounding him in every direction. A dozen at least, all armed with electric weapons.

"Put the rock down," one of the pirates said in an odd accent. "We don't want to get hurt." Rho swung the rock farther back to strengthen his threat, but then realized how foolish he must appear. They could kill him in an instant, rock or no, knife or no, if that's what they wanted to do. He looped the rock toward the river over the head of one of the pirates, who rather than shoot him, ducked. The rock hit the ground beyond the pirate and bounded to a stop.

"Thank you," the pirate who had spoken said, and the others relaxed and started walking toward a small lighter-than-air vessel anchored higher up. "We're here to help you. Your glider ship tangled with our net, the one we use for moving cargo, and we feel bad that it broke up and wrecked."

Rho was glaring at the man with anger and some fear. He had never believed pirates could be friendly or kind, let alone polite, and this made him suspicious, and if anything, more afraid.

"You are one of the elder people, I know," the man said. "You've always heard bad things about those of us who left you, so I understand that I can't say anything to change your feelings. Well then, come along and help us pull your glider out of this ravine and see what can be salvaged."

The man began walking up the slope, his back toward the astonished Rho. Rho looked around. He was alone. No one was guarding him and he could run if he wanted, but there was no place he could run to. No place safe or remotely hospitable, and no tools. He shook his head, gathered up his

food bag and gear and followed the man.

For the next several hours the crew of men—and one, maybe one, woman who carried a tiny baby on her front—utilizing anchor ropes and winches worked their inflatable aircraft down into the ravine and lifted out all the pieces of the glider with a net similar to the one that had been responsible for its crash. The people collected every bit of the wreckage and then they hauled it all northeast toward a place lower in elevation and where the river did not flow so swiftly.

Rho had worked alongside them, but mostly he just watched and ate the food they had given him. He fell asleep on a pile of soft cordage on board the gondola of the small craft, and when he woke up two hours later they had already deposited the wreckage inside a tall wooden barricade set upon a rocky promontory of the surface, their massive dirigible poised overhead. When they laid out the glider pieces in the level ground inside the barricade, and his gaze skimmed over the long, crumbled high-altitude wings, he knew the machine was not repairable, not by him now, at least under these circumstances. The loss of freedom that his lost sailplane represented only deepened his already bottomless despondency.

The men in this group watched Rho warily as if he might steal a weapon and attack them, even though Rho had no intention of doing so. He collected his down sleeping bag, his slit pressure suit and other useful undamaged or repairable gear, and found an out-of-the-way corner next to one of the several ground storage structures where he could nap whenever he needed. At last he had leisure to take off his boots to check his feet, which already hurt less than before. They were red and swollen, but not frostbitten.

A man brought him food and left without saying anything. Rho wandered around the compound and climbed up to a platform on the barricade from which he could observe.

The sky around was darkening, telling of coming rain. From what he could discern, the group was a mining outpost for the pirates. Down below near a river, they dug into an open pit by hand and washed away the soil with hand-powered water pumps. Whatever it was they found, it didn't comprise much bulk. Probably copper and gold for electronic circuitry, or maybe silver or aluminum. This rock was rich. Rho's own people mined in a similar fashion. As he watched, he noticed a man climbing a ladder toward him. He was not holding a weapon. It was the same person who had spoken to Rho when he was . . . captured, or rather, invited to follow.

"Do you see any animal-humans?" the man said in his odd accent as he neared Rho's position. He must have meant the insan-hayawan. Rho had unconsciously been scanning the perimeters of the working areas for threats. He always did this when he was on the surface. It was instinctual.

"The area is clear, as far as I can see."

"Good. Then you're doing your job. This is a lookout's post. When the man whose shift this was saw you climbing up, he went down another way."

"Are you all that afraid of me? Enough to avoid me?"

The man looked at Rho closely. "Afraid? No. Not afraid. You don't understand us."

"Apparently I don't."

"We're not afraid. We're resentful."

Rho needed time to let this sink in. The stories of his people said that the pirates—the algolim—were rebels who abandoned their traditional way of life and struck out on their own, and when they found that they could not sustain themselves, they became robbers. Why should *they* be resentful?

"I know what your legends are. You should hear our side of the story."

"Tell me."

"Have you noticed that we have few women among us? It's because they die young. When our ancestors lived with the elder people, we could see it happening then. We

wanted to move to the surface, to give up life in the air, but the leaders would not even discuss it. When our ancestors persisted in raising the question, the elders banished them. They gave them a minimal technology, food, clothing, and supplies. A few weapons. Just enough to survive, but not enough to begin building a stable colony on the surface.

Some of our ancestors made do with our situation. We struggled along and suffered. But others turned evil. Their looting and raiding gave us all a bad name. We have nothing to do with them, but we carry the burden of their conduct."

"How many of the algolim—that's what we call you. How many are bad?"

"Algol? Are we demons and snakes? About 40 percent, but the number is growing. More of us are joining them and they are… as terrible as it seems, they're raping the animal-human females that they steal. If babies result, they abandon them." His body trembled with suppressed anger. "They also kill preemptively and that allows them to live longer on the surface. They wipe out whole villages of animal-humans. We never do that. We only kill in self-defense, reluctantly."

A sudden gust whipped down from the mountains and brought with it trails of wet grey mist mixed with sudden squalls of soaking rain. Rho shivered with the cold. The men watched as the valley below was obliterated by cloud.

"We will cease operations early and gather within the fortress. It's too dangerous to work when we can't see. Let's go down now. My name is Acaqua."

The men began transferring their tools and supplies up into the dirigible. Acaqua took Rho to a furnished room inside one of the storage buildings and handed him a heavy cloth bag with a double handle.

"This space is my office. We leave in the morning. I'd invite you to join us, but I suspect you'll refuse. So, here is a

short-range radio. Yours is broken beyond repair, as is your weapon. One of those we can not give you—I would, despite its value, but the others won't allow it—they believe you might turn it against us. You should be safe within the barricade, and there is a secure, hidden space for a retreat, if you're attacked and they get inside the walls—I'll show you. Wait here in the fortress until your family returns, and I'm sure they will."

Rho did not know what to say.

Acaqua was watching him closely and said, "It's hard for you to say thanks. I would feel the same if our places were reversed, if your people had offered me a kindness. Our prejudices blow upon us forcefully. Maybe I've helped to change that." He turned and walked out the doorway.

After a moment of considering what to do next, Rho followed outside with the radio to a table, extended the antennae, turned on the power, and slowly dialed through the common frequencies, the ones his parents would attempt in their search for him. Nothing came across. He looked into the bag and found a solar collection cloth to recharge the battery, but something hard and heavy was wrapped up within the cloth. He felt its weight and shape. He had never seen one before, but he was sure it was a miniature handheld e-m weapon. He replaced it in its wrapping in the bag and slowly looked around. Nobody had noticed.

Again, he spent a long period alone with his thoughts and the odd noises around him in the dark... The pirates apparently had established a night/day orientation and slept soundly, as he could tell by their night-long snoring. He drifted off prior to daybreak and woke to shouts. The best he could tell, the pirates were leaving early in a hurry because a group of warlike insan-hayawan was approaching.

Acaqua rushed up with a large bundle as Rho was condensing his sleeping bag for storage. "Get all your gear and follow me."

Rho scooped up his belongings in an armload and trotted after Acaqua, who led him to a plank wall in one of the

larger buildings. Acaqua fiddled with one of the planks and this released a wooden peg. He lifted the peg, took a step backwards, and brought with him a portion of the wall that was hinged on one side. A door. Rho had never seen one like this before, other than in illustrations. Acaqua then said, "Here's your hiding place and here's your food. I suggest that you stay here as long as possible. The animal-humans will arrive soon. They probably will get inside the barricade. Once they find that no one is here and there's nothing of value to steal or eat, they will leave, but it might be a couple days. You have food enough for, I'd say two weeks."

Acaqua set the bundle down.

"Thank you," Rho said. "I hope I can repay you."

Acaqua smiled and said, "I hope not. I hope I never need help like this. And you might die, anyway and not have a chance."

"But you never know."

"That's right. You never know."

A sudden impulse urged him to say, "My sailplane. I can't put it back together or even launch it from here. Take it with you. Use it as a model for building your own."

"I hoped you'd offer this," Acaqua said, smiling. "Our people don't have gliders. We've bundled the parts, so it's ready to load. A beautiful machine. I have to go now."

Rho crawled into the dark opening and pulled the door behind him. It took a while for his eyes to grow accustomed to the dim light seeping around the cracks between the wood and its stone foundation. Only then did he find the levers that would let him out again. By then, the long silence following the last shouts of the departing pirates had been replaced by the hoarse calls and complex staccato vocalizations of the insan-hayawan. Rho lay still and listened as they prodded, poked, and thumped their way over every square foot within the fortress, and even scratched against his door.

Some twenty-four long hours later, Rho felt it safe to leave, but he would have left anyway because the hiding place was making him claustrophobic nearly to the point of panicking and passing out. He gathered up the food into an old backpack that had been left behind, along with the radio, and set out toward the sea. He would not have asserted it with confidence, but he felt that it would be easier for his family to find him west of the mountains. At least the radio signals wouldn't be blocked by the mountains.

He had just reached the bottom of the hill when a sudden movement froze him in his steps. Not 20 meters ahead was a mature insan-hayawan male, armed with a bow. The creature had stood up from behind a rock and instantly released an arrow. Rho's too quick stop had made him slip on the loose rocks and fall backward, and the arrow, which had been headed for a point below his throat passed harmlessly overhead. Rho was sitting on his behind unable to move, pinned by the backpack, unless he rolled over to get his feet under him. The creature by then had stepped out from behind his hide, and fitted another arrow. Rho yanked the handheld e-m gun from his belt, leveled it at his attacker, and fired a burst. The insan-hayawan screamed and crumpled into a heap. Rho maneuvered to his feet and went to look at the body.

This was the closest he had ever been to one. Other than his darker-hued skin, it was remarkably human-like in appearance, remarkably indistinguishable from humans, at least from a man in the hunter caste. His footware was even similar, being made of a thick hide. His head was partly shaved, and the hair tightly braided. Rho pulled the bow from the creature's hands and looked it over. It was of excellent craftsmanship and was ornamented with beads of a dark blue with golden inclusions. After a brief search, he recovered the stray arrow, adding it to the rest and their quiver, and lashing it and the bow to his backpack.

"They'll be useful, someday," he said.

He searched the remains, removing a steel-bladed

knife much like his own and a packet of pemmican, and began walking away, but something that had been only a whisper in the back of his mind asserted itself at full volume. What if these so-called animals really were humans? What if his traditions about them, like pirate stories, weren't all true?

He stopped and listened. What had this insan-hayawan been doing here? Maybe he was a sentry, or maybe he had companions nearby. He heard no unnatural sounds. But, whatever the danger, Rho knew he must do what was right. He turned back and though it delayed his departure until midday, he built a cairn over the body and left the knife on top. "So, if his friends find him, they will know we're not evil," he said.

It wasn't long before he started seeing signs of a hayawan village, or outpost somewhere in the vicinity—he had walked onto the edge of a strong network of connected human footpaths and a small pile of mixed bones. He guessed its exact location by a thin column of smoke rising from the forest and gave it a wide berth.

For the next week he walked with as much stealth as he could muster and the conditions demanded or allowed. He moved with care through open, grassy places where he could see distance and where he might be spotted. He hurried through the forest. Sometimes he followed a wildlife trail along a drainage and sometimes he bushwhacked. At night he built fires with a stone and steel kit found in the backpack, studied the construction of the bow, and tried to pull it, but it was too hard.

From then on, he worked at pulling it every day to build up his arm until he was successful. He learned to unstring and re-string it with speed. His feet became blistered and painful and his muscles ached, but he kept going. The distance from the mountains to the ocean is not great in that land, and it was inevitable that he reach the coast, where he built a rough shelter against the wind at the base of a turf-

covered slope that dropped off to rocks and beach below.

The days here were the loneliest he had ever experienced. He activated the radio to broadcast an automated scrambled message once an hour. Hopefully, someone not a pirate would pick it up and bother to investigate. With no goal to accomplish and no requirement for physical exertion, but only waiting, his mind dwelt on his family, and he mourned the loss of Lyra. The questions about his family's rules and traditions nagged him and he was haunted by the memory of the insan-hayawan female he had seen in the north tundra two months or so ago, a lifetime, it seemed. Those thoughts led to a sadness over the male he had killed. Would someone mourn his loss?

Rho passed the time by practicing on the bow, shooting into a clump of dead sea grass that had washed up on a beach. Not only did he have a genetically inborn aptitude for all aspects of hunting, he also was a fast learner and soon was able to hit a 10-centimeter bull's eye at 20 meters, and he knew he could improve his effective range even more. He was able to collect material to make a bow for Deneb and designed and fashioned a sight, which made his shooting even more accurate. Saving the charges of the handheld e-m gun for lethal threats—it was extremely slow to recharge—he hunted with the bow and brought in game—Oryctolagus, fish, and an occasional small hippocamelus—to extend his food supply. For the first time in his life, he tended to sleep longer periods during the darkness and stay awake longer in the daylight.

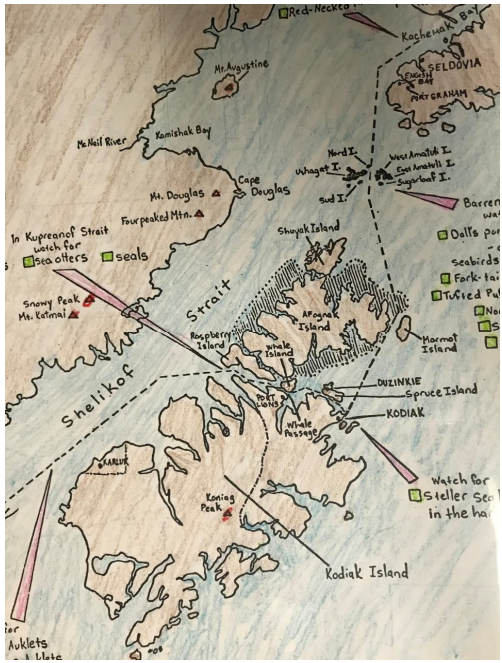
The days and nights dragged along. The waves pounded the shoreline until he didn't hear them anymore. Rain fell, clouds passed before him, and the sun, as always, slipped behind the horizon of the ocean only to rise again behind the mountains.

Nearly a month after he reached the coast, Rho woke up one morning to find three dirigibles moored just north of his shelter. He could hardly believe what he was seeing. He should have thought it would happen like this. With no way to

reply to his automated radio broadcast because he seldom listened in to see if anything was incoming, his family's flight had just shown up. They must have triangulated his signal. Rho ran to the top of the turfy slope and shouted at the top of his voice. "I'm here. Over here!" Feeling stupid that no one heard him over the sound of the ocean, he ran down the hill and said in a calmer voice over the radio, "Hey people. I'm 500 meters south. It's good to see you."

Chapter 5 Endnotes

There are a few map makers who document populations of insan-hayawan, but there are large sections of the surface they dismiss. They also attempt to track the movements of the algolim. The hunter class has a subclass of miners who collect the raw material for vessel repair and manufacturing. The pirates didn't have enough numbers of people to split into castes or classes.



Portion of Map Onboard the MV *Tustumena*, Summer 2024

Six

Blue Star

Saiph, Rho's father, was named for a giant blue star in the constellation Orion, the Hunter. "Saiph" was derived from an Arabic phrase in ancient folklore, "Sword of the Giant." A large and powerful star, it supposedly had burned through the hydrogen at its core long ago, and because it primarily emitted ultraviolet light, invisible to the human eye, it does not appear as bright as its stellar neighbors. It is destined to become a supernova.

Rho's father learned these aspects of his namesake and more when he was a small child, and hadn't thought about them much since. He fit himself into the line of his ancestors, and never expected his life would differ significantly from those of past generations. But when Lyra died, his light that was already diminished much the same as the diminishing of his people, nearly extinguished altogether, much the same as did the light, or spirit of his son, Rho, though no one could tell this by Saiph's outward behavior. He never once imagined he would be any sort of sword of a giant.

He had been a kind and patient father, training his sons in all they needed to survive, in hunting, fishing, food preservation, gathering of materials, navigation both in the air and on land, radio technology—father and sons spent countless quiet hours shoulder to shoulder building a radio together—engineering, mining, repair, and all the skills of flying. And like most men of his culture, particularly in the hunter caste, he left the teaching of history, storytelling, biological sciences, and other important but non-essential studies to the children's mother. His lifelong hope was the same as all the men, for one of his sons to acquire a wife of his own, produce children, and then accomplish what only a few men expected now: build this son and his family a new dirigible of their own. Most of the residential aircraft functioning and in service now were at least 100 years old and

were only kept up with continuous maintenance.

When Lyra died and Rho vanished in the Andes Mountains, nearly all Saiph's hopes faded. He was of course glad to find his son alive at the coastline of the southern American continent and he welcomed him back into the family despite his reckless actions. Life went on normally afterwards, but something in Saiph had changed, perhaps forever. He no longer made effort to reach out to his son, neither of his sons, in fact. He never shared anything of his joys and inner thoughts. Never took any extra time to teach them where they, even as young adults, had a weakness in knowledge and experience. Never took an interest in their interests, or asked non-critical questions. The father almost never conversed with his sons except about business.

A further blow to Saiph's sense of connection with life came through an event always possible with their tenuous abode in the sky.

Leo, his father, despite his accumulated years, was by no means feeble in either mind or body, but he had by the natural weathering of time lost the sharp edge of his agility and strength, and balance. He insisted on working the same as the other men, though Saiph often steered the easier tasks his way. One day after Rho had been recovered, and the family residences were lashed together some 2,400 meters over the east coast of Asia, the son tried to stop Leo from climbing underneath a gondola to clean and lube the collapsible radio antennas.

"Please, Appa, Deneb was just under there cleaning the head and said the antennas are good. Can you charge the oxygen tanks instead?"

"I know what you're doing. I heard what Deneb said. The antennas weren't broken, but they might need cleaning soon and he couldn't do it just at the moment."

And then as Saiph was saying, "At least clip in. Please!" Leo, ignoring him, proceeded over the side for a short time, shouted "bird crap," then popped back on deck to collect water, rags, and detergent.

A few hours later, he explained, "I set my goals for that work session, as I've done my whole life, and I intend keeping my schedules. My lady love is gone, and I find meaning in work. Maybe next time, I'll do a child's job."

Saiph never desisted in trying to protect his father from the more hazardous jobs, even reminding him how much their family needed him simply to be a grandfather to the two children, Subra and Duhr, whom Leo loved dearly, and Leo never stopped resisting by what he did, though he sometimes said, "I'll clip in next time." He even dismissed, though with good humor, the badgering of his adult granddaughter, Cassio. And every cycle of the moon, Leo lost a little sharpness.

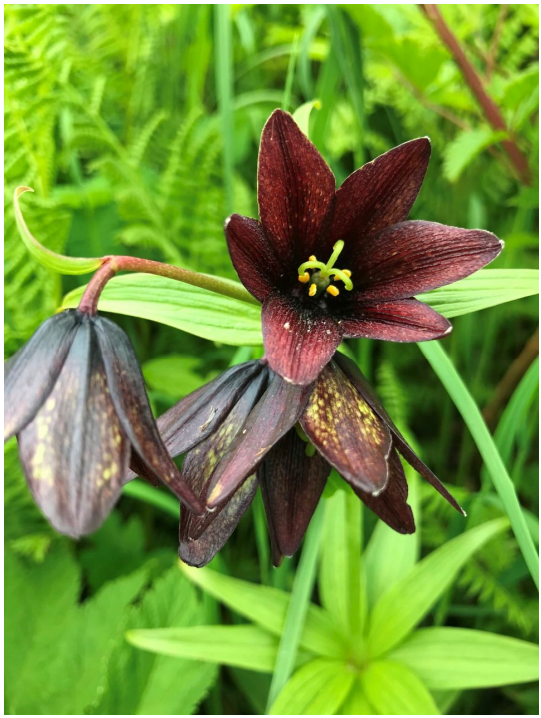
So, it was no surprise when one day Leo did not report for the morning family meal. No one worried at first. He often missed a group meal because of his sleep pattern, but when the youngest grandchild, Subra, returned to the table from Leo's room and said, "Not there." Everyone jumped up. Saiph divided everyone into search teams, and Rho gave out handheld radios. It didn't take long. They might have expected him to have been stricken ill in some out-of-the-way corner. But they found nothing. Not even on the tops of the envelopes, not even *inside* the envelopes. They searched again, with everyone divided up differently. Neither he nor his body was on board. There could only be one conclusion.

In the end after endless discussion, mutual and self-examination, and speculation filled with sorrow, they believed he had climbed to the top in the dark night to watch the stars, and by accident lost his hold, or his balance, or fell asleep, and silently slipped over the side.

After this heavy loss, to fill the gap left by Leo, all of Saiph's ordinary, natural fatherly attention and interest was given to the only children in their group, sons of his brother Rasalas and his wife Betria. That pair's other child, Cassio, had not long ago married, and her husband Tarraz had joined the flight. They still had promise of producing offspring. In Saiph's rare leisure time, he, almost secretly, carved tiny flying toys and animals for the nephews and children he hoped

would come someday. He sometimes urged Vela to make garments for them.

Often in unguarded moments, like just before or after a sleep, or when nothing required attention, he simply gazed out across the sky, not thinking of anything. And he remembered back when his lifespan seemed to have no limits: the endless hours he spent with them, not only in training and providing for them, but in simply playing games, and enjoying them, and the pride he had in producing such miracles that were a part of him. The joy of the memories—the memory of when his own boys were small and his personal hopes still thriving—and the pain of his own continuity of life ending, having no upcoming generation, were too much for him to bear. And when this pain came to mind against his will, and when unthinkable solutions like living permanently on the surface were forced upon him, sadly, he reacted with anger.



***Fritillaria camschatcensis*, Summer 2024**

Seven

Flying Away

During the time of separation from his flight, Rho had believed rejoining his family would restore the joy he had felt in living all during his childhood and youth, but it was not the case. In those years he had been part of a family, a clan, and the people, but now for the first time, he felt himself as an individual human, separate from all those. In the months following his rescue he performed his tasks with the same physical zeal as before, but his heart was cool toward them. Before Lyra had died, he had looked forward to filling his place among the adults of his people and to raising children. Significance arose from repeating the cycles of life of the previous generations. It was good for his people then, and it had been good enough for him.

While he had been on the ground and apart from his family, his whole concentration focused on survival and returning to his flight, but when he returned, he was forced to think about what Lyra's death meant. The annual betrothal lottery came and went. Since he had already been selected once, his name was not in the list. It would never be on the list again. His opportunity to marry had come and gone, forever. Even his brother Deneb was disqualified because only one male in a family unit generation could win. Rho gave fleeting thought to leaving his family and striking out on his own, but his brother was sick with a recurring fever, which increased his duties. Rho kept to himself and seldom talked about his experience on the ground, and when he did, he did not mention details that contradicted his father's views.

The one interruption to the routine of life came with the sudden, unexpected loss of his grandfather, a loss that shocked him by the vacancy, the shrinking of life, and a reminder of mortality. More importantly, he also simply missed him.

The hours, days, and months passed, by every outward

appearance, little different than they had all of his life before. The family members pitched in, gathering the materials, and built him a new glider. He spent days—many days—hunting and collecting on the surface, and on the maintenance of the family dirigible. In his off-time he researched the historical archives on bows and sketched one of a design vastly improved over the hayawan model, but for most of the time he sat alone and contemplated the remote earth flowing beneath him and his family. The white, grey, and sometimes black clouds in the sky all around were stately and grand, but empty.

It was again late summer, early fall in the high latitudes of the northern hemisphere, and time again for the tarandus hunts in their traditional territory. The whole family clan lashed their dirigibles together and assembled in Saiph's to discuss their plan of attack. Rho's uncles and cousins were present. Rho hardly listened as his father outlined their procedures the same as he always did. He hardly listened until his father said, "It appears that the insan-hayawan are following the herd more closely than last year. The chance of an encounter is much greater, and we must be on guard."

The long-submerged image of the insan-hayawan female he had seen once long ago flooded into his mind. Female, he thought. Girl, or woman, he corrected, also remembering the man he had killed in the southern hemisphere.

"Don't tell me you're bringing that primitive weapon on the hunt?"

Rho, holding his bow, looked up from his reverie to see Saiph waiting for a response.

"I thought I'd practice," he said, turning the bow to again admire its elegance. "And I might try to kill a tarandus."

"Make sure you have extra e-m batteries."

The dirigibles disconnected, and one containing the beaters dropped to an opportune upwind location, while the

other two lifted up high over the herd for the shooters to take ground positions downwind. Again, Rho was a beater, as were his cousins, Chertan and Chort. The three of them split up and approached the swarming, branching herd, nudging it toward the shooters, and when the herd passed through and around the line, Rho heard the usual whine and release of the e-m rifles. He was about to join the butchering when his father radioed. "Rho, we didn't collect nearly enough tarandus for this harvest. Would you mind taking a couple more?"

Rho agreed to the job and progressed on after the herd. This was what he had hoped to do—to stalk and kill tarandus with the bow. Besides, cutting up and carrying meat to the dirigibles was deathly boring to him now. He took his time relocating the main streams of the herd, which had moved over a nearby low ridge and was now climbing another ridge at a gap. Once located, he ran a wide circle around it to get ahead of the herd and settle into a willow thicket. While he waited, he tore up handfuls of tundra grass and tucked them into openings and pockets of his clothing. They itched and tickled, but the camouflage would allow him to better remain hidden when he rose up into a shooting posture. And this seemed to be easier than he supposed because a stream of tarandus came right toward him, moving at a walking pace, ripping up mouthfuls of lichen and plants. His first shot at a young bull flew too high and missed, but unlike an e-m rifle's noise, the sound of the string and arrow did not alert the herd and send it running, so he calmed his mind and focused on the details. His second arrow pierced lungs and heart. The beast went down. Rho didn't notice because he was already fitting an arrow for a second kill, which also was successful. By then the herd had split around him so that his clump of willows became an island, but the animals on the downwind side, naturally, caught his scent and sent the rest of the stream trotting, snorting, and lowing as they went.

Rho emerged from his hide, radioed Saiph to ask for a pickup, and began field dressing the tarandus to cool the meat. He was busy with this when a human shape crept into his

peripheral vision. He thought maybe a cousin; probably the younger Chort had snuck up to scare him, and so he pretended not to have noticed. The cousin was closing in, perhaps to touch him on the back and make him jump. Rho adjusted his e-m gun to the mildest stunning setting—perfectly harmless—and let him get within three meters, and like lightning, Rho swung his gun and fired a round that hit the prankster square in the chest, but it wasn't a prankster at all, but a male insan-hayawan poised with a spear held overhead. The male dropped his weapon and fell back into a puddle of water.

Rho pounced to its side and aimed the e-m rifle at its head. A stun shot from this close and at the head would be fatal. The creature, an adolescent really, maybe a few years younger than Deneb and with no facial hair, closed his swirling eyes as if waiting for death. Rho watched intently, ready to kill him instantly at the slightest motion of threat, but the cub just sat there in the water, breathing rapidly. Rho took two steps backwards and sat on an overturned clump of dry tundra, one perhaps that had been dug up by an ursus. The cub still hadn't opened his eyes.

"What do you think you were doing?" Rho asked, not expecting to be understood. "Don't sneak up on people like that, unless you want to die too soon."

The cub, his eyes open now, gestured with trembling hands and spoke. His gestures seemed clear enough, and because some of his words were similar to those of Inglosi but with a musical accent, Rho knew that he was apologizing and explaining something about being impressed with Rho's skill with a bow.

"So, you were watching me hunt the tarandus," Rho said, making gestures for observing, shooting a bow, and an arrow hitting a creature with antlers.

The cub nodded.

Just then, Rho heard a human-like call coming from the ridge ahead, the one the departing tarandus herd had just climbed. He looked up and saw three forms, the nearest one like the female insan-hayawan of his memory, but older and, if

possible, more beautiful. It was she who was calling a word, "Alamos." The cub pointed to himself, picked up his spear and wobbled up to the slope to join them. The female gave an intense, lingering look of curiosity at Rho, and the four of them, certainly a family group, turned and disappeared over the rounded ridge of the tundra.

Later in the day, when Rho returned to where the family dirigible was anchored, he noticed from a distance a lack of the usual frenetic activity of butchering and packing. This was strange. When he came near, everyone was standing immobile in a circle, looking at something on the ground before them. People stepped aside to let him in and he saw there his uncle Mirfak kneeling over a body, the immobile, naked, now pale grey body of his son Chort. Rho's mother was wiping blood from the corpse. Rho stared along with everyone else, but everyone seemed to know what had happened, and he was afraid to ask. He looked around and made eye contact with his brother and they left the circle.

"The insan-hayawan murdered him," Deneb said, his voice thick with anger and grief. "They had been following the herd and caught him alone. They murdered him."

Rho was too shocked to speak. As he stared blindly over toward the body, his mind smoldering, he realized that something wasn't quite right with this story. The cub he saw was not evil, only curious and afraid, if also cocky. Rho gave Deneb an awkward hug and returned to the crowd. Looking closer without being obvious about it, Rho saw bite marks in Chort's skin and portions of flesh ripped out. Even more strange, the bite marks were not of any animal, but of a human. This was a mystery that Rho needed to solve, so when Saiph asked Rho and Deneb to return to the scene to find and recover Chort's e-m gun, Rho didn't balk at all, nor did Deneb, whose low fever had abated for now and who was ready to kill anything that moved.

"I don't think the insan-hayawan did this," Rho said when they were well away from the dirigible.

"Why do you say this?"

"I was up close to one today. It just… It was just like a real person, maybe shorter than us, but with human understanding."

"What? What killed Chort, then?"

"I don't know, but it may still be out there. Be ready."

"Tell me later about your mythical ground person."

The young men crept along, nearly invisible and silent, not at all like Chort had done as a beater announcing his presence for the entire world to see, hear, and smell. Their senses were totally engaged to note anything dangerous and to react instantly, so when a dark shadow rose up seemingly from a mud pit and leaped at them, snarling, they both shot quicker than thought, Deneb blowing a hole through its abdomen and Rho's blast severing head from the body. Rho walked up and kicked the head over so he could see its face and what kind of being it was.

"Human, mostly," Rho said. "Or its ancestors were."

"An insan-hayawan," Deneb said. "I've never seen one this close before. There's Chort's gun in its hand."

Rustling and the tramping of feet nearby made the hair on the back of Rho's neck stand up. "More are coming," he said and picked up the lost gun. "We better run."

Rho and Deneb didn't tell anyone about the mud-covered insan-hayawan or the surface-dwelling humans when they got back. It was already more than anyone could bear to both grieve and finish the harvest. Indeed, the harvest alone didn't allow time for grief. The meat had to be put up quickly or spoil. To add to their anger against a pack of insan-hayawan the complexity that some of those animals out there really were humans would have only further angered and paralyzed their whole clan. But Rho resolved to a plan of action, jumped

in to help process the harvest, caught a swift nap, and then immediately listened to samples of languages on the server library. It didn't take long for him to understand that the hayawan he released, of some of the earthbound humans of this northern land, spoke an Esplandián-like dialect, Esplandián also being a component of Inglosi.

Early in the next daylight period, now airborne, the people conducted a funeral service for Chort. Over the past few centuries, the people had developed the custom of the funeral service being led by the oldest female of the clan, and in Rho's clan's case this was Betria, the wife of Rasalas, Saiph's older brother.

The dirigibles, lashed together again, rose far into the atmosphere. The air was calmer than usual, so the negligible drift would not take them far. Betria followed the traditional memorial ceremony with words both of sadness and hope. Her speech and Rho's thoughts merged into a single line of reflection for him. The people believed that humans were both of body and spirit, and that the spirit didn't die or lose its distinctiveness when the body died. This was true for them because it had to be. Their significance was real, and the evidence of this truth is they desired it to be real, just as hunger is evidence for the existence of food. Beyond this, they had faith the Creator would take care of their spirit which would continue its existence in some other reality.

When Betria finished speaking, her daughter cued a radio-like machine that played music, harp music. It was Lyra, and this more than anything punctured Rho's emotional defenses and set him weeping, not for himself but for Chort and for Rho's wife never to be. The men moved Chort's wrapped body to the edge. The wrappings had been infused with animal fat and volatile distilled oil. Betria lit this, and the men waited until the fire was burning well, and then lowered the body on a woven bier, which itself caught fire until its connection to the gondola severed. The falling body accelerated, so the fire burned hotter and hotter and roared, leaving behind a dark smoke trail. The ball of fire diminished

until it could no longer be seen. The flaming bier was high enough that none of it would reach the ground.

"Rho, it's time to eat," his mother called.

"Be right there."

He downloaded an Esplandián instruction program into a portable player so he could listen as he worked and then trotted to the dining area.

"I've been thinking, Papa," he said after the customary moment of silence before eating. "I don't think all the insan-hayawan are as barbaric as people say. In fact, some of their tribes are not animals at all, at least no more than we are."

Rho wished he could have waited to bring this up, but because they would be leaving this region soon, he had to take the chance. His father said nothing, and Rho knew this was a subject he did not wish to discuss. Rho would have to be more provocative to elicit a response. "The creature that killed Chort was a true insan-hayawan. It left bite marks. It was an animal that no longer had a spirit. But I talked with another earth-bound human today, and not one of the sundered. He was of those we always thought of being animals. He approached me and I talked with him."

More silence from his father, and more intense, and now his mother and brother had also fallen silent. Up until now, they might have offered a casual remark, but things had gone too far. Rho felt that they were shocked, and afraid.

"I have more to say," Rho said. "I have lived on the ground longer than anyone we know. It's complex and tough on the surface, but not unhealthy. Some of the insan-hayawan are people. They are different, but they're fully human. I know this firsthand. I would like to visit their village nearby and become acquainted with them. I respect our way of life, and I love living in the air. I don't want to leave it, but we are dying and need to explore changes."

His father stood up. "I forbid you from speaking of this

matter again."

"But we…" Rho began.

"I forbid it," his father whispered and left the room.

Rho stared at his plate for a long while. Neither his mother or brother had moved or made a sound. His father's attitude had made him angrier than he ever remembered being before. He felt alienated and trapped, which helped him decide what to do. The alienation gave him freedom, and the feeling of entrapment propelled him toward action.

"I will say this additional thing, Mother. Maybe you can find the proper occasion to tell Papa. I want to find a wife among the people on the land. Our traditions about the pirates are only half true, and I believe they are at least half-wrong about the insan-hayawan, too. I can't call all of them insan-hayawan, animal-humans, anymore. Some are only hayawan, humans, as best as I can tell. This is the answer we need. Our people are dying. We need to add the strength of the earthbound people to our genetics. And, maybe more important to me, I'm lonely. I can't be fulfilled as a person only living in the air. That's all I have to say."

"Rho, my dear son, we'll be leaving soon. I don't think your father will wait now until the tarandus processing is complete. We'll change locations and finish in some other place."

Rho stood up and hugged his mother. Deneb put his hand on Rho's shoulder. His mother left, presumably to join his father in their private quarters. Deneb, too, disappeared, probably to his personal hidey-hole slung between the envelopes. Rho had free rein of the main cabins. He loaded as much food as he thought his glider could carry, and stuffed the nose and tail with bags of down, which he would need for trade, he thought. He took no more than what was his share. He carefully packed away his bow and arrows and the pirate pistol. When this work was accomplished, he ascended with his provisions and snuggled into the cockpit of the glider.

He woke, and the dirigibles were already airborne. His father, brother, and others had launched the flight while he

slept, his father not waking him because he was angry and hurt. Rho got out of the glider to stretch. The green, brown, and speckled red land before him glided along below. At his feet he saw a hand-held backup radio, an e-m rifle, batteries, a solar charger, and a large bag of food. Probably put there by his brother. After loading these, he untied the glider and walked it off the edge, swinging up into the cockpit as it plunged down the side. He pulled up and began circling, hunting for thermals, looking for soaring or kettling birds that would show their presence.

Where to go now? he thought.

He had made no clear plan beyond the frustrated talk with his father, but the obvious answer now was to seek out the hayawan he had met earlier. But he couldn't strand his glider. He had never successfully landed a glider on the surface before, but had read about it and knew he'd have to find a cliff to park on that he could launch from. He steered back toward the hunting ground and looked for a suitable place. The ground was a broad valley flanked by rocky peaks with snowy sides. It would be a long walk down the mountains to where the hayawan might be camped—he could see faint trails of campfire smoke—but the terrain was clear and the brush in the drainages not too dense, he thought.

He aimed for a promising peak to look for a workable cliff. But as he dropped altitude, the thermal effectively failed and the glider stopped gliding, had stopped flying altogether and was dropping like a stone. He had experienced this before—a low spot in the air pressure, or in temperature, but never this close to the surface. He pulled back as hard as he could, but the glider was landing, ready or not. He swung tightly around and hit the ground on the downward slope as he braked as hard as he could, hooks dragging. The glider rumbled to a halt. Not 20 meters ahead was a steeper snow slope. Okay, he thought. I now know one way to land, but will it launch again? Better wait until I have an uphill headwind. He anchored the glider, covered it with a camo tarp, and climbed back into the cockpit for a sleep that happened to

coincide with the few short remaining hours of dusky dark.

As an experienced hunter, Rho moved invisible to his prey, silently, and almost always from downwind. The hayawan, also experienced hunters and sometimes subject to predation from the ursus, were wary of being ambushed. But Rho was far more intelligent than the ursus, and much smaller, so he was able to avoid detection and observe, which allowed him to choose his prospective ambassador, the male cub named Alamos. He watched and waited until Alamos was alone, picking blueberries and scanning the horizon with every handful. Wearing an improvised ghillie suit, Rho crept up to just outside bow shot, and when the cub glanced in his direction, Rho was on his feet, motionless. The surprised cub barked once involuntarily, but made no other sound of alarm. Rho turned his back and waited. When he turned around, the cub was right there. Rho sat on the ground and offered the cub a piece of dried tarandus. The cub took and smelled it, and then put it in his mouth. Rho knew that the salt in the meat would make a positive impression. The cub, not really a cub, but a boy not long until becoming a man, asked for more.

The best he could with halting Esplandián and gestures, Rho said that he wanted to be taken to the boy's village. The boy's countenance showed fear, and saying No, he drew his finger across his throat and pointed to Rho, saying in Esplandián that the village likely would kill him. Rho just shrugged his shoulders and said, "Well, then you need to tell them about me so they won't be shocked."

"Give me time, and see what happens," the boy said, more or less.

Over the course of the next few days, the boy showed up a couple hours each day, and together he and Rho built a shelter at the base of a rock face using a combination of stones, wooden poles, cord, and a greased tarandus hide Rho had brought. They had situated the shelter on a small rise

accessible only by walking up some fairly steep surfaces that offered reliable traction when dry, but which would be slick when wet. It was a defensible location, at least from an animal predator. When Alamos was away, Rho worked on the shelter, or hunted, fished, and collected edible fungus. He listened on his radio, but heard nothing. It was a lonely time, and Rho was impatient. He missed his family and feared that his attempts to tame, or befriend, the hayawan people would fail.

Every time Rho mentioned to Alamos that he wanted to be taken to the village, Alamo shook his head and said that it was too dangerous, and after two weeks of this, Rho decided that the boy was never going to change his mind, and so he made his own plan. Alamos had been gone now for a couple days, and when he finally appeared again he brought a gift of six arrows and said he couldn't stay because the village was moving to a new spot south, and the business of moving required him to help. Rho realized that he had to act now because Alamos might never be back, and the village would be difficult to reach. So, after Alamos left, Rho tucked the gift of arrows into his quiver and put on his pack that he always had ready, and he set off to track Alamos. Rho had followed him once or twice before for a kilometer, so he made quick progress already knowing the direction and general course. Alamos was in a hurry to be back and wasn't moving with his usual caution, which made it easy for Rho to pursue him. Once he spotted his figure swiftly crossing the tundra, Rho held back until he saw trails of smoke in the near distance, a sure sign of the hayawan village, and then he quickly caught up. He needed to know the exact, best route for crossing the last few kilometers, including any stream crossings.

As Alamos passed the village's sentries, they spoke, giving away their hiding places, and that allowed Rho to slip around them unseen. Ahead was a circle of domed houses of similar construction to his shelter. Hayawan of both sexes and various ages were busy with various tasks. He walked straight into the middle of the central courtyard and slowly turned in a circle. No one had noticed him. Three half-tame, long-legged,

shaggy canis lupis approached and sniffed at him. They hadn't barked because, he being already in the middle of the village, they assumed he was a member of the pack, but Rho's unfamiliar, unpleasant smell worried them and they backed away and growled, fur on their necks raised.

It took only moments for the hayawan to notice the lupis and Rho standing in their midst, and before Rho could take another breath, it seemed, one of them knocked him down from behind with a club.

Rho awoke in the dark with a splitting headache. He felt sick to his stomach. It took a minute for him to remember who he was, where he was, and what time of day or night it might be. The clubbing had been intended as a killing blow, and Rho's last instant flinch probably saved his life and avoided a concussion, he hoped. His hands were tied behind his back, and he was lying on a pile of hides in the open, not on a proper bed. He tried to rise to his feet, but his legs were tied together at the ankles. A low fire glowed and popped nearby. He tried to look around, and a figure next to the fire rose up, walked to him and whispered, "How are you feeling?" It was Alamos. "I thought for sure they would finish you. There was an argument, but in the end they decided to let you live, at least for a while, until morning. Do you know what fact swayed their decision?"

"I'm too skinny to eat?"

"No, you ignorant fool. We don't eat people. It was because you were carrying a bow and arrows, they let you live. They were impressed by that and wanted to wait. But they might kill you when it is light, in a few hours. Or when we all leave the camp soon, in a day or two."

The bow and arrows. His knife. They had taken those away from him, and his pack. But oddly they hadn't taken his e-m pistol and batteries. They were still strapped to his waist and leg. Apparently, they hadn't seen these before and didn't know what they were.

"Untie me," Rho said. "I need to change positions. My head hurts."

In the firelight, Rho could see Alamos showing his characteristic fear. “I have to sleep now,” he said. “We have a big day tomorrow. I’m glad you didn’t die, at least.” He knelt down, held the nozzle of a skin bag to Rho’s lips and gave him a long drink of water, then walked away into the darkness.

Rho let his head down onto the hides. He had blankets over him, so he didn’t feel cold, but he was tired, far too weary to think or worry about his situation. He wasn’t afraid, but he was upset that maybe he had made a mistake. Maybe these hayawan really were as brutal and barbaric as his people believed. He drifted into a sleep whose primary feeling was of overwhelming regret.

A faint thump on the ground near his head roused him back into consciousness. A tiptoeing figure retreated into the dim light of dawn. The figure was female, as he knew because of her gait and her pleasantly rounded hips. She was young, as he guessed by her thick, braided hair. On the ground in front of his face was his steel knife with the horn handle.

Picking Blueberries at Hatcher Pass, Summer 2024

Eight

Repelling Raiders

Rho waited until the encampment was quiet. Then in short, slow stages he twisted around and rolled onto the bare ground so the knife was within reach of his hands still behind his back. He got the knife in his hands and worked it into a position to cut the rope.

"Ow," he exhaled and stifled a frustrated grunt. The knife was sharp. He could feel a warm trickle of blood. "This won't work," he said quietly to himself. "I'm as likely to slice my wrists and bleed to death as I am to free myself."

He lay still for a minute, thinking, concentrating, and then tried again to maneuver the knife into position, and managed to place the blade between his wrists and the rope with the blade turned to the rope, but…. "Ow." Another nick. It just wasn't going to work. Moving the knife away wasn't safe either and he suffered yet another nick undoing the position he had so carefully achieved. He twisted back into his original position on the hides. But he no longer had the covering over him. The effort took a surprising amount of energy and Rho was exhausted. He soon fell asleep, afraid he would be cold.

When he woke again, it was still dark, but dawn glowed in the southwest. A few early risers were moving slowly about the village, and lights shone through cracks in some of the summer huts. A thin wisp of smoke curled up from the ashes of the fire. Stiff and cramped, Rho straightened his legs. He was warm and both his legs and arms had been freed. He sat up and looked at his tender wrists. They had been roughly bandaged while he had been sound asleep. Someone also had replaced the blankets over him. He must have been too tired to awaken when this all happened. The knife was lying by his side, and now in his sheath. Next to it was a bulging water skin, his backpack, and his bow, unstrung. He peered inside his pack and smelled cooked tubers of some sort

in a cloth bag, and dried meat. He stuffed the knife into the pack, slowly rose to his feet, and looked around. Nobody was nearby at the moment. Walking naturally, without haste, as if he were not fully awake yet, and unchallenged by the pack of lupus who had probably relaxed their all-night vigilance and allowed themselves the luxury of deeper sleep now that the humans were stirring, he walked between darkened huts to the edge of the village and began climbing into the open tundra.

The green and snowy and talus-strewn hill below where he had forced-landed his glider was much harder to climb than it was to descend. He realized that if he was to live on the ground and gain acceptance from this tribe, he'd probably have to follow them south and take more time for them to get accustomed to him. He gathered up all his supplies stored in the shelter and climbed higher to a level platform near a small tarn that had an overhang, almost a cave, in the cliffside. This would protect him from both the rain and sun, and from curious or even hostile eyes that might bring others with more unfriendly intentions. His shelter below was far more comfortable, but too exposed now that the hayawan knew he had escaped and was somewhere out here. He then ascended the final slope up to the glider and dragged it on the snow down to a steeper place where he could launch when the wind was right, and then he tied it down more securely.

It was not long, however, when he knew his attempts to hide were in vain, because the next day early in the afternoon, as Rho was preparing to attempt launching the glider for a look around the area, Alamos appeared over the crest of the hill above his cave.

"How did you find me?" Rho asked, exasperated.

"It wasn't hard." Alamos turned around and whistled, and a female quickly stepped up behind him from where she had been concealed below the edge of the slope. The breeze behind her blew loose strands of hair around her face. She was wearing a loose skirt of thin dun-colored hide, split in the middle to form leggings. Rho felt his stomach lurch.

"She was watching when you left the village, and

followed you," Alamos said in Esplandián. "It was she who gave you the knife and the tubers. Her name is Angelus." At this the girl flashed a smile and then frowned and glared away.

"Oh, okay. Thank you. Umm. I had plans today to survey the area for game and other hayawan villages. Would you be interested in flying with me? The wind is rising up the slopes, and the air is perfect now for launching and gliding." He looked up at the several *chrysaetos* soaring in rising circles. The two hayawan followed his gaze.

"You mean, fly like the golden eagle?" Alamos said, showing nothing but fear. "We came out here to pick blueberries."

"In my dreams I fly," Angelus said in a silky voice.

"Come see." Rho led them to the top of the snow slope, where Angelus walked around and felt the skin of the glider. Rho pondered for a moment and then opened the cockpit and began unloading his emergency supplies and extra tools. He looked at both Alamos and Angelus. They were fairly short and chunky compared to his people, but he thought he could lighten the sailplane enough to lift off, taking one of them at a time. He removed the electronics unit and drained half the water ballast. Control would be squirrely, but he had flown this way before without too much problem.

At this point, he wished he had some kind of lightweight electric propeller to assist in takeoff, but gliders were only for sport, not useful purposes, so no one had bothered to create anything like this.

"Who's first?"

Angelus stepped forward and began climbing onto the sailplane. But Alamos took her arm and gently pulled her away. "I'm going first," he said, "to make sure it is safe."

Rho arranged a seat for the passengers, told Alamos to climb into the cockpit, and then fastened his straps. He gave him a small polymer bag and said. "Hold this, just in case." Next, he took a last look at his "runway" to reaffirm the risk was acceptable, pulled out the chocks holding the glider onto the slope, grabbed the grips on the side of the glider, and

pushed it down the slope as hard as he could while running along the side. When the glider was moving too fast to keep up with, he threw himself aboard in front of Alamos (who was already whimpering in fear), pulled down the canopy, settled in, and waited. The glider picked up speed, shaking harder and harder, and neared the cliff below. Rho set the flaps for takeoff, and just as it reached the cliff edge, the glider swung up into the air. He eased it over, leveled, and felt the thermals lifting them up like a mother tenderly lifting her child. Alamos behind him was vomiting into the bag.

"Let me down," he moaned miserably and heaved once more. "Let me down, please!"

It took some time to maneuver into a position to land—the landing simply putting the glider up the snow slope, which was the quickest and safest way, and yet difficult technically. Rho had never done this before and managed it well. At the top of the slope, he sprang out of the cockpit to keep the glider from sliding back down, and surprisingly, Angelus ran up to help him hold the aircraft and turn it around. Alamos dragged himself out of the glider and eased down on a rock. Rho emptied the bag, wiped it out with snow, and offered it to Angelus. She shook her head and said, "I don't need it. Alamos has a nervous stomach, as we learned whenever we were in canoes on the water."

She jumped into the cockpit, and with Rho going through the motions to show her how, she buckled herself in.

He ran alongside, pushing the glider again, and jumped in. The glider bumped down the slope and lifted into the air as before, but Rho's heart was beating hard, not painfully, but this flight was giving him a feeling of exhilaration tempered by a contentment he hadn't had since he was a child on his first solo glide. Here, just behind him was a young, fecund female, her legs pressing around him in the tiny cockpit. There was this incredible feeling of things being as they were meant to be. For a moment he thought of Lyra, that this was her behind him, but someone far more exotic and mysterious, like in the dream of a girl when he awakens and feels that he

doesn't know who she was, but he is bound to her in love and affection. Like in the ancient stories of love potions that make the fellow fall in love with the first woman he sees upon awakening.

The glider rocked up and down and side to side with the minute changes in air pressure, temperature, and wind direction. Rho pulled into a long bank so they could look down at the grey, white, and green earth below.

"It's a dream," Angelus said. "It's one of my dreams, the most real I've ever had. You are the hunter from my dreams." She put her arms around him and squeezed tightly.

Rho had been enjoying the gentle contact with her and the intimate proximity of her presence, but this lit a fire and alarmed him. His head was spinning and he was scared of losing control of the glider. He had never realized before how much focus and concentration it took to fly one of these things. It always came so naturally to him. "But this is real," he said. "It isn't a dream. We could crash and die," he said not to scare her because there was no more danger than normal, but to define to her the risk of gliding 300 meters above the ground.

"It's a dream and I can do things never permitted while awake."

Rho began to get the idea that she really believed she was asleep and dreaming. And that's why she wasn't afraid. But he didn't know how to disillusion her, except, maybe…

Alamos shaded his eyes as he peered up at the tiny glider framed against blue sky and clouds. The glider's flight had been in smooth arcs, but then it began acting like it had gone crazy. First, it looped over backwards, twice. Then it leveled and flipped over in a spiral. Then it lifted into another loop and dropped straight toward the ground, spinning, before pulling up and coasting to a landing on the scree slope above. He walked up to the glider, which hadn't shown any sign of life since it had come to a halt. The canopy slid open and Rho was slowly unbuckling himself. Behind him, Angelus' head

was leaning over. She lifted her head and her eyes fluttered open. “I’m awake now, I guess,” she said. “You won’t believe where I’ve been. I’ve seen a vision.”

Rho walked with them back toward the village a way, picking the low-growing blueberries in patches along their route nearly black with the fruit on the bushes. Alamos had given him a basket, which he tied into his belt like they did. The three of them worked near each other, not speaking, their hands in rapid movement, fingers gently rolling the berries into their palms. Rho noticed Angelus glancing up at him from time to time, then glaring hard away like she did whenever he looked at her. Rho had picked many dozens of liters of blueberries in his life, but never had he felt such happiness. The breeze on his skin, the smells of the crushed foliage under his feet, the near silence—this is the best of female companionship, he thought. Sharing life together.

An hour passed.*

When his basket was near to full, Alamos straightened up, slowly stretched, saw Rho’s overflowing basket, and said, “Oh, I never would believe sky people could pick berries.” Angelus smiled at Rho, and this time she did not look away.

That night, Rho decided that he wished to marry Angelus, if it were possible. Alamos and she did not come the next day, or the one after that, and Rho decided he should return to the village and try again to gain acceptance. The days and nights were lonely and he really didn’t have much to occupy the time. But then early in the following morning, Alamos appeared, apologizing for not coming to visit sooner. “I couldn’t get away. My father was mistrustful of us having been away so long last time.”

“How is Angelus?” Rho asked.

Alamos looked at Rho and did not speak right away. “She is okay. I finally convinced her that the flight in the glider was real, that it wasn’t a dream. She is embarrassed about the way she acted. She also is in awe of you. Like you are a god from the sky.”

"I'm not a god, Alamos. I'd like to show you and her a history of our world. I don't know if your people remember what happened in the past. How we came to be the way we are, with our peoples divided like they are. Those of the sky and the earth."

"We have legends and stories. I don't know how true they are. Many of our people believe you are demons."

"And many of ours believe you are rabid brutes, worse than animals."

"Oh." Alamos thought about this a moment. "Then you and I are bridges."

"Alamos, I'll tell you a secret. I came here to look for a wife. I would like to marry your sister. Is she spoken for?"

Alamos smiled and looked off to the horizon. "That's funny. She was pledged to marry someone, but she refused him. She said he was too stupid. He wasn't, but she thought so. No one of our tribe is interested now. They say she is willful and dreamy, that she wouldn't make a good mother. They know she untied you and let you go."

Rho was silent for some minutes. "Would your people, your family, allow the marriage?"

"I don't know if they would allow you to live. But she is interested in you. She's impressed. Obviously. I think the elders would be relieved to have her gone and be someone else's responsibility. I mean, she works hard, and makes a contribution, but she asks lots of questions.

"She dreams of flying. Her name means Angels. Did you know?"

"What are Angels?"

"Messengers from the Creator, more or less. In the ancient Greek language."

"What is Greek?"

"Would you like to watch a history summary? We have a machine that plays moving pictures." Rho wondered if Alamos knew what the word "machine" meant or if he could conceive of film or video.

His question was answered when, uncomprehending,

Alamos checked the position of the sun. “I can’t stay longer,” he said. “I came to tell you that our village is moving south soon. The salmon migration will begin. I won’t see you again until we return after the winter season.”

“Do you know if your salmon hunting ground has any slopes or cliffs where I can land and launch my glider?”

“Um. Salmon are fish in the water, but…” He walked to the edge of the level area and peered toward the southern horizon. “Not anywhere nearby. We can see mountains from the big river, but they are days away.”

Rho was crushed because he didn’t think he could follow Angelus’ people and live apart from them without his glider and all his gear.

“How soon will you leave?”

“It will take, probably, three more days to pack.” Alamos handed Rho something bundled in a scrap of cloth, turned, and slid down the slope.

Rho watched him until he disappeared into the thickets far below. He opened the cloth, and inside were two small, round, partly mashed blueberry cakes.

The situation demanded that Rho act quickly. He pummeled his brain for an idea of how to win the trust and acceptance of the hayawan.

During the short night, he looked up the word “salmon” on his glider’s server and found the Latin names for them, and then when he couldn’t sleep, he lay on his pad under his quilt and ran over what he might bring as a gift. He could kill game, and take it to them, but he couldn’t carry more than 30 or 40 pounds. Raw meat was not what they would want before they traveled. There was no time to gather any plant material. They wouldn’t understand or appreciate any specialized technology. What did they use as currency? Did they even use any symbolic material for trade?

The answer to his mental search was obvious.

He pulled out the compacted bags of down from the glider, made up his pack for a second trek to the village, tied

the bags to his pack, which made a huge, but relatively lightweight bundle on his back, and then in the middle of feeling homesick for his continuously moving life in the clouds, and missing his family, he slowly fell into a delicious deep sleep, the kind of sleep of earthbound, day-and-night people who live in walled stationary houses.

During the walk to the village, he worried that he might be making a lethal mistake, but when he remembered the otherwise empty future that awaited him, he pressed on.

The clouds above felt unnatural for a few moments and he thought he caught a shimmer that might be a malfunctioning camouflage system of a dirigible, or one not well maintained, or functioning up to peak, but just "showing the seams," as his people called it, when sunlight hit the fabric a certain way. He halted and pulled out binoculars, but either the malfunction, or whatever it was, stopped, or maybe it had been only his imagination, because on a closer look, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. It made him nervous because he didn't know if this indicated aeronauts, or who they might be. He was glad that this time he carried the e-m rifle in addition to the pistol.

When he arrived at the edge of the village, two of the young men approached him casually, snatched his knife, took him by the arms, and marched him to a hut where they removed and confiscated his pack containing the down bags and pushed him inside. A moment later, one returned and took the e-m rifle, from which, thankfully, he had extracted the battery. He hadn't seen either Alamos or Angelus. As his eyes adjusted to the semi-dark, he noticed that the space smelled like savory smoke, and it wasn't long until he bumped his head into a solid carcass hanging from the rafters and realized he was in a smokehouse. For a fleeting moment, he feared the tribe might be cannibals that planned to preserve him here, but nothing he had seen up until now gave evidence that they were

that sordid, barbarous type of hayawan, the ones his ancestors and the elders hated and feared. Again as before, they had left him with his small e-m gun. Clearly they had never seen one and what it could do.

The rest of the day passed in his confines, and then another day. All he had seen was a cub—a boy—who brought him food and water, though he heard the busy sounds of what he assumed was the process of packing for the tribe's move south for the Oncorhynchus run. Could it be they would take him with them? Would he remain a prisoner forever, isolated from all contact with Angelus? He was bored out of his mind and took to swinging the hanging cured carcasses.

On the following night, the noise picked up and he thought that the hayawan were at last beginning their journey. But the noise quickly grew strange and louder, and Rho felt goose bumps rising. A woman screamed nearby and men were shouting. Feet pounded by the hut.

Then the whine of a charging e-m rifle preceded the crackle of air, crashing, and what sounded like jumbled, flying debris outside. Rho thought he should blow a hole in the side of the smokehouse so he could see what was happening and escape, if necessary, but he was afraid he might hurt someone on the other side of the wall. The decision was made for him because the wall exploded in his face. Rho ducked and tried to shield his eyes. Blood ran down his face. The faint light of the summer early morning shone in. He pulled and tore the gap wider and climbed outside. Hayawan, women, children, and men were running madly in every direction. Then he saw one human, a raider dressed in black, calmly walking around the corner of a hut, his e-m rifle carried at the ready. The raider lifted his weapon to shoot at a boy, but Rho put a hole where the raider's heart had been, and then picked up the raider's e-m rifle and extra battery. The village was being attacked. Rho began listening and determined to stalk the raiders and kill them all. Maimed, unconscious bodies of the hayawan seemed to be everywhere. A confused, wounded lupus limped along.

Where was Angelus? Fear for her paralyzed him for a

moment until he heard a female crying and groaning in the next hut. Rho instantly went into stealth mode and silently advanced up to the hut's entrance. He peered inside through the partly opened door. A weeping girl lay on a pile of blankets that were stained with blood. Her skirt was also bloody. Rho slowly pushed the door open. A raider was pulling up his trousers, and Rho leaped inside and kicked him over before shooting another raider who had been waiting his turn. Rho turned to deal with the first raider, thinking that he should take him prisoner, but the girl had already cut his throat. It wasn't Angelus.

He dashed back outside. On the ground was a raider mortally wounded with a broken spear shaft protruding from his belly. The noise now seemed to be on the eastern edge of the village, and Rho ran madly in that direction. A dozen raiders were lumbering away, most of them dragging or carrying young females, who were either struggling weakly or had been knocked unconscious. Other raiders were walking backwards, defending the retreat as village men were shooting at them with bows. One hayawan man ran at the escaping raiders, yelling and waving a stone hatchet. The raider's e-m blast cut the man in half. Rho didn't know what to do. He couldn't shoot the raiders without hurting the females.

Then he saw a shimmer and gleam over the heads of the raiders a short distance away. Same as a few days earlier. Behind the location of the envelope of this moored dirigible was the distortion in the air of what surely was one other dirigible and possibly two more. Without thinking, he raised his e-m pistol and aimed at where the envelope of the nearer dirigible should be. He missed. He must have shot over the top. The gun had only one more charge remaining. He lowered his aim, prayed a word, and then pulled the trigger. The gun hummed, and a fiery, orange and red explosion rocked the air, knocking down the raiders and causing the hayawan men to fall to their knees. Heat pressing on his face, Rho ran out and dispatched two of the collapsed raiders with the rifle. The rest had dropped their human burdens and ran. Rho aimed at

another envelope, but the e-m battery was too weak. That dirigible and any others had already lifted off, leaving their slower comrades behind on the ground. He quickly changed batteries and took aim. He could easily have shot four or five of the fleeing raiders in the back as they ran, but then he remembered Acaqua in the Andes Mountains. Maybe these raiders were related to him. Maybe these had learned their lesson. Maybe they would reconsider attacking "helpless" hayawan villages. Besides, he might need the batteries for raiders who might still be lurking in the village.

Someone in the air high above the near ridge—from an escaped dirigible—was shooting at the village with a powerful e-m cannon. One of the huts behind him blew up like a geyser. Rho raised the barrel of the captured rifle toward a distant shimmer, peered through the sights, and released a shot. His eye traced the pulse's trajectory until an explosion triple that of the first dirigible, but much further away, rocked the whole world, it seemed. A flaming ball slowly descended over the horizon.

Two men and three boys with spears and bows, undeterred by the second concussion of air, ran past him in pursuit of the remaining raiders. Rho ran toward the burning envelope a short distance away. He quickly rummaged through the extensive gondola, one much like those of his people. It seemed undamaged. He found what he was looking for—a fire extinguisher—and with some effort, put out the flames consuming the top of the envelope. Returning to the gondola, it hit him with a blaze of joy that he was now wealthy. The former home of the raiders was aged but serviceable. It was certainly loaded with technology and supplies, including equipment for making hydrogen. The envelope. The envelope had suffered extensive damage on its side and some on the top, but it just might be repairable. The failsafe against catastrophic damage from a hydrogen explosion sparked by a lightning strike or accidental fire had at least partly worked. What a prize! he thought.

But what about Angelus? In the intensity of the

fighting, he had forgotten about her.

Just then, he heard steps and rustling behind him. He turned, prepared to fight a raider who wouldn't give up his home so easily, but it was Angelus, his love, healthy, whole, and apparently unhurt, her eyes smoldering with anger mixed with fear as she held tightly to a bloodstained spear. He cried out in relief and, while she still held the spear, hugged her with all his might.

A voice, Alamos behind him, said, "Perhaps you should wait until your marriage."

***Note:** "An hour passed." The occurrence did not fit the pacing of the story, but during this hour when they were picking blueberries, the three young people observed a nearby family of brown bears who were also harvesting, straining berries from stems and leaves with their lips and teeth, neither of the groups much concerned about the other.

Unalaska, Summer 2024

Nine

Transitions

The hayawan village had indeed been prepared to migrate south, but the assault and pillaging sent them into shock. Five—four of them men and one old woman—had been killed outright, and three others would not survive long with their wounds. Many had been injured physically, and spiritually, as well. Those young women who had been grabbed or violated, escaped relatively unharmed, except for the severe trauma.

The survivors washed and dressed the bodies of the dead and braided their hair. Rho helped build the rock cairns. During this work, the hayawan gave him sidelong looks, but nobody spoke to him. They were too afraid and overawed. They dragged the naked bodies of the raiders downwind for the wolves, bears, eagles, and ravens to clean. Rho, alone, said a prayer for the dead for them, evil as they were, and then he helped tend the injured with medical supplies he found in the damaged dirigible.

Alamos had sometimes been busy in other matters, the nature of which he refused to discuss with Rho. And he also went around and told everyone who would listen the amazing stories of his experiences with his friend, the Young Man of the Air, so by the end of the funeral activities, the hayawan—the whole village—had accepted Rho, not only as a deliverer but as a welcome, if remote and lofty, guest. Alamos also thereby had hugely increased his own standing, which while not necessarily his intention, was a benefit he fully enjoyed.

Rho had been given the now-emptied, patched-up smokehouse as his own quarters, where, when not helping or inspecting the wrecked dirigible, he spent his time alone. He often went to look at the dirigible. The gondola was larger than what he'd been used to, and the layout of its spaces awkward and inefficient. The envelope design, too, seemed odd, particularly the hydrogen section, which was larger than necessary. While repairing it all would be relatively simple if

he had enough replacement material, the work would take a long time. He made a careful inventory of the available supplies and a list of tasks that needed to be done. He also thought it might be worthwhile to investigate the crash site of the second downed dirigible. He was surprised that the men had already arranged for a war party to look at the site and dispatch any survivors. Through Alamos he asked the leader of the group if they would bring him a report of the condition of the wreckage. They agreed to do so, but when he asked them to spare any surviving raiders who would surrender, he could tell by their grim faces that he asked in vain.

Angelus kept away from him, seemingly on purpose, because when he did see her, she always sped away. And while he knew that the village was glad he was among them, there was no warmth from them. He didn't know what he could do to convince anyone (other than Alamos) that he hoped to marry one of their daughters. So he was astounded when, in the evening two full days after the raid, when he was contemplating beginning work on restoring the dirigible and envelope the following morning, he heard a cough outside the door of his hut. He had observed that villagers never knocked at the huts of others before entering, but had just gone inside whenever they wanted—Alamos always just barged in—and this was something different. He opened the door to find one of the older men dressed in a beaded, light leather costume, something he had never seen worn by them before. Behind him was a female, also dressed in hayawan finery.

The elder bowed to Rho and took the female by the hand. By then, Rho recognized her as Angelus. Her partly veiled face was decorated with henna dots up her cheeks and temples. The air around was full of a scent Rho knew to be a strong musky perfume made from glands of the *Ovibos*.

"I give her to you," the elder said. "I'm her father, Manteco. I accept the rare feathers you brought us as the bride price. I'm sorry we can't perform our ceremony in the regular way—our community is in too much pain. Love and protect her all your life, and she will work hard and give you children,

if Agayun Creator wishes. If you ever abuse her, you will pay dearly." With that, the man led her to Rho, nodded, and then turned and walked away. A small group of children that had been hiding nearby laughed merrily and then ran after him.

Rho just stood there, confused, not knowing what to do. His wedding with Lyra had been planned a year in advance and would have taken place en masse during the Annuary gathering with hundreds of people all around. He looked into Angelus' eyes and saw she was shy and happy, if a little nervous. "Alamos arranged it," she said. Maybe this isn't what you expected. Are you disappointed?"

"I'm not disappointed. Not at all. It's what I want."

We've met long before this time. When you killed the grizzly bear in the last caribou season, we watched your hunt. You were holding a—I don't know what it was, but it reflected two points of light.

So, it was you I saw with your braids!

"Mm. Tomorrow morning we'll have a wedding feast with the community, and then everyone is leaving south."

He stepped back and she walked in and began building a fire from wood and kindling piled against the wall. Rho sat down and watched her open up vents in the roof and assemble a small pile of dried lichen and some pitch-laden wood. In a few minutes the door opened and two young girls came in bearing first a low table and then hot food—a stew with tubers, herbs, and caribou—which they set on the table. When the fire blazed up and was no longer smoking, Angelus lit the oil lamps and joined him at the table. In another minute, the girls returned and brought in and poured a dark liquid into matching clay bowls. Rho smelled a kind of wine.

"Made with berries," Angelus said.

"It's good."

"We save it for weddings."

The hut was getting warm by now, and Rho was sweating because he and his people seldom used heat except at extremely high altitude, and the heat also made him drowsy. They took a long time finishing their meal in silence. The

lupus barked outside and they could hear singing from somewhere in the village. Mournful singing. Rho didn't particularly care for the scent Angelus was wearing, but of course he couldn't say anything. Instead, he went to his pack and removed a tiny vial from a small pocket. This was a gift he planned to give to Lyra on the occasion of their first intimacy. She took the vial with a coy smile and held it up to a lamp to see the light passing through the glass.

"Take off the cap and smell," Rho said.

She looked puzzled. She didn't know what to do.

Rho uncorked the top and gave it back.

"Mmmm," she said. "It's delicious. What is it?"

"It's made from the plant, *Lavandula angustifolia.* We collect it in temperate regions."

"Do I?" She tilted her head back and opened her mouth as if to drink.

"No, no. You put it on your body."

She smelled it again and said, "Ohhh!" With that, she jumped up and ran out of the hut. Rho followed her to the door and stood there. He couldn't see where she had gone, but thought he should just wait. He could hear more sounds, but merry, of what had to be a party going on at the other side of the village. In a few minutes, she ran back, her face flushed, and following her was the alluring, sweet aroma of the perfume he gave her.

"I washed off the muskoxen oil," she said simply. "This is better."

Almost immediately, the door opened once again, and in came an older woman. "I'm Angelus' mother," she said. "I'm called Modesta. This is our gift to you." In came the girls together bearing an oversized fluffy quilt, the exterior made of a coarse woven blue and red silk. "We made this with your feathers and with fabric we found at the house from the air. Your feathers were too fine for the weight of our thinnest hides. The weight would press them down and make them cold." She spread the quilt over Rho's bed and left.

Rho worried that the hayawan might be scrounging

essential material from the dirigible, but that matter would have to wait until later. Angelus finished her bowl of wine and climbed under the quilt, where she began undressing.

"What if someone comes in?"

"They shouldn't. But if they do, that's their own problem."

Rho blew out the lamps and climbed in beside her in the firelight. She was warm, of a soft heat he had never felt before. It was warmth created to comfort and heal, to give life and never to burn.

"It's a dream and we can do whatever we want," she whispered.

"We'll be late for the feast."

"Huh?"

"We're expected for the feast. The people are leaving today for the south. There's little time."

Rho opened his eyes and found Angelus' face inches away from his, her breath sweet and warm. She smiled and shook him. They both rose, she concealing her body with the down quilt, and they dressed, she partly under the quilt and with her back turned away.

"Maybe we made a baby," he said matter-of-factly. "I hope so."

"I do too, But, so soon? It is not my time."

"Don't your women conceive with intimacy?"

"Of course, silly. That's what it's about. Didn't anyone tell you?"

Rho realized they weren't communicating. There was some missing information with one or both of them. "Won't you ovulate, after last night?"

She turned and looked at him in shock. "No wonder you have so few babies. You're too ignorant. But what's ovulate?"

Rho carefully explained the process.

"That's fascinating," she said, "but it's not what my mother told me yesterday. I guess we don't know about ovulation, but to the point, if you're right, our women ovulate by cycles—once every cycle of the moon."

"Oh. For us, they ovulate when they engage in intimacy. Something about sex stimulates it to happen. I'd rather not go into more detail."

"It's not like that with us, if my mother told the truth. I ovulate in…" She counted on her fingers… "four days, maybe. Just after the full moon."

Rho was thinking about how her people and his had diverged genetically, when Alamos burst in, glanced shyly around the room, and said, "People are gathering now. You must come."

He kept urging and badgering him as he and Angelus walked along, hand in hand. People heard Alamos and emerged from their huts and applauded before stepping in behind the procession, so that by the time they reached the tables in a circle where the food was laid out in wooden bowls, they had formed a parade and everyone was there.

Rho took in the stares, nods of approval, sly looks, admiration, and words whispered behind hands, but he was also thinking that without knowing for sure, he'd guess his people lost ovulation cycles over time after they took to the air, and with the continuous motion, their biology was no longer regulated by a 24 hour day. What effects induced ovulation might have on his people's failing reproductive rates, he didn't know.

Angelus was led to the right, and there her female escorts seated her among the elderly women, and Rho was seated on the left next to the older men. Angelus' father was next to him. As soon as Rho took his place, Manteco stood up and raised his hand until everyone hushed.

He said, "Our culture is living life with nature, with Agayun Creator of the Universe and his blessing and bounty. In the wilderness, all we see is truth around us. Just life and the gift of life, and the blessing around us sometimes can be

harsh. The truth can be harsh… And the wilderness is healing..."* His voice failed him at this point, and he simply raised a cup as a signal for the eating and drinking to begin.

There was little talk anywhere in the crowd. After a few minutes, Manteco leaned toward Rho and said quietly so only he could hear, "Ordinarily, a wedding feast would begin at midday and last until dark. But today we must leave for the south, and so everything is early and hurried."

"You know that we are not traveling with you. Angelus and I must stay and repair the dirigible. It's necessary if I ever want to see my people again. We can use it to gather resources and defend you."

Manteco nodded. "You don't need to explain. Angelus is meant for an importance we could never give her. She always believed that the old ruins suggested more than our stories accounted for, and that if we could only unlock their secrets, our lives would be better."

"We have preserved nearly all the records from the past before the floods."

Manteco gave Rho a penetrating look. "I'm afraid to know what happened. Our stories are mere sketches, mostly symbolic, and those are bad enough. And they don't explain all the ruins we find. The question is, how can we learn and be better than our ancestors. How can we avoid their mistakes?"

"I think you and we both have learned because of the hardships we've endured. Those led us to make decisions for good. Others have not made the good decisions."

"We have beasts that look human and are not. You people of the sky have raiders that look human and are not."

Rho resented the idea that any of the air were beasts, but he didn't express this. It might be true. The raiders he saw certainly had acted like unreasoning beasts. What he did say was, "The answer may be in the rejoining of our peoples, after so many centuries. We have a lot to teach each other."

"Agreed." With this, Manteco stood up and all the people around fell silent. Those on the outside perimeter were hushed by those who knew a speech was coming. Children

crept in and sat on mats spread over the ground.

Manteco raised his voice and said:

"Our stories that my fathers passed to me and we pass on to our children tell us that in ancient days the deeps opened, the rain fell, thunder and lightning, and the waters spread over the land. People took to ships on the sea and climbed into the mountains. There was a great earthquake, and waves destroyed a third of the people. The sun turned black and the waning moon red like blood, and the stars fell from the sky. Every mountain and island moved. A star blazing like a torch dropped onto the rivers and springs, turning the waters bitter and poisonous. All the people who were left hid in caves and in the rocks. Locusts like scorpions with breastplates of iron came down to sting and torment with their tails. Hailstones fell upon everyone. Beasts arose and performed miraculous signs. Those people remaining worshiped the beasts, or else they were killed, and then the people became beasts themselves.**

"Our stories tell us that angels came down from Heaven to make us human again. To give us sight and hearing. To give us love for the Creation and each other. My new son here is not an angel. That I can see. (Here he put his hand on Rho's back.) He is different from us, but I know he's human. And yet he is like an angel. He is a messenger offering us truth and knowledge we have lost. He delivered us from vile enemies, though they are of his own race. We must welcome him, and help him as we can."

Angeles came to stand behind Rho, and the people all stood up and applauded. Then the party broke up and people trotted away, some holding food in their hands as they hurried. Rho stood up beside his wife and a few came up and bowed before them. Angelus bowed back. Last came Angelus' mother, Modesta. She said nothing to Rho, but gave him a bear hug. Then she whispered to Angelus, a loud whisper meant to be heard by Rho, "Give him babies. Don't be stubborn or afraid. You are healthy and know what to do. Make us proud."

Angelus blushed hard, frowned at her mother who was

walking away, laughed nervously, and said, “My mother always talks to me like this.”

The people departed not long afterwards, a single family group leaving at a time. They’d each travel at their own pace, and for safety and fellowship collect together in one camp for the nights until they reached their destination. They took with them the essentials of life, with the lupus and domestic gatos following, and leaving only the huts and larger furniture items. Rho, Angelus, and Alamos waited with Manteco and Modesto for the parents’ turn. They all had said goodbye at the wedding, so there was nothing more to say.

When the parents had taken their place and walked a little way to a curve in the trail, they turned around and waved. Alamos called out, “We’ll see you soon!” and then cried.

Rho felt sad, but he also was relieved because now he would start on the dirigible repairs. Angelus looked alarmed as the last people disappeared, because as she said, “I’ve never been this alone before in my whole life.”

Alamos gathered his few personal possessions and moved them into a tiny side room of the smokehouse, and then Rho sent him to collect willow whips for weaving panels to patch the damaged gondola, and for stitching it together where reinforcement was necessary. Angelus had learned weaving as a child, so he set her to this task. He began emptying all the contents of the sizeable, multi-roomed gondola-house to make a fresh start at sorting and organizing it. He took the electronics back to his hut for fine repairs and testing. On the second day of serious labor, he noticed some things were missing. Some preserved food bins in the commissary had been emptied, but what sent shivers down his spine was a missing e-m cannon.

“Did you take a heavy device like a tube with a metal mount?” he asked Alamos.

The boy shook his head and said, “I don’t even know what those are.”

“A weapon. Like my hand gun and the rifles, but much larger.”

The boy's eyes gleamed. "I think I know what took them. I'll catch it."

That night, lying beside Angelus, Rho heard high-pitched screaming from outside. He sat up and saw that Alamos' mat in the side room was vacant. He ran outside to find Alamos dragging a brown-skinned girl, a stranger, who was kicking, scratching, and trying to bite him. Rho didn't know what he could do without being bitten himself. The tussling in front of him seemed to never come to a conclusion until Angelus appeared from the hut and yelled. The captive girl stopped struggling and Alamos redoubled his grip, fearing flight or another wound.

"Who are you? Where have you come from?" Angelus demanded.

The brown girl stared a moment and then spoke, but it wasn't Esplandián, Inglosi, or anything like them.

"She is from Asia, I think," Rho said. "Her race is Asian and African, maybe a cross."

"Asia?" Angelus asked.

"Another part of the world, far away."

The girl clearly was afraid, but she no longer struggled. "I think she was a prisoner of the raiders," Angelus said.

"She must have been on the dirigible when it crashed," Rho said, and came closer to look. She glared at him like a frightened animal and made a snarling bluff lunge toward him. "She has burns and bruises. We need to take care of her."

They guided her into the smokehouse hut. When she realized these people weren't going to hurt her, she relaxed somewhat. Angelus tended her injuries while Alamos stood guard outside and Rho took the raider's undamaged onboard server to a table outside and searched for a translator. The server fortunately had several programs. It wasn't long before Angelus said the men could come inside. The girl looked entirely different now. Her hair had been combed and braided, and she had been bathed. She was wearing bandages across her forehead and on both her hands.

"She had been badly burned in the fire," Angelus said.

Rho sat down near her and got her to speak into the server's microphone. "Keep talking," Rho said in Inglosi, figuring that she may have picked up some knowledge of the language from the raiders. The girl spoke at length, wildly gesturing with her hands. When she began to slow down and fell mute, the server processed a few seconds and then began offering the translation of what it identified as a hybrid between ancient Nepalese and Hindi. This is what the translator said in a rather saucy, masculine voice, not at all like the girl's voice.

"My name is Parvati. Thank you for your care of me. The pirates killed my family and stole me from my home in our mountains two months ago. They used me as a slave. When the dirigible exploded and crashed, I was surprised to be alive and ran up into the hills. When it grew darker, I returned to take food and clothing, but I could not find medical supplies. They were gone." Here she paused for breath and then continued. "I'm glad that the raiders are dead or gone, but I must tell you that one of the raiders is still alive and is hiding in the mountains. I believe he took a cannon and has other weapons. I know this one. He is an animal. He is dangerous and has no means to survive on the ground other than to attack you. You need to find and destroy him as soon as you can. Thank you for helping me. I will help you every way I can. I must also tell you that I'm a month pregnant with a raider's child. I do not know which of them is the father."

"We need to find this raider right away," Angelus said. "I wish we had kept some of the dogs with us."

So, added to the intricate and laborious tasks involved in repairing the gondola and envelope, Rho and the siblings spent hours each day searching for the raider and keeping watch overnight. Rho now and then did find tracks and other signs, but the raider nevertheless had enough wild craft to avoid being seen. For some reason, the raider never attacked. Parvati

gradually recovered from her burns and helped out as she could. Sometimes she wandered off and was gone for hours, and Angelus once asked her, "Where do you go? Aren't you afraid?" Parvati only said, "I'm homesick."

Days passed, and the work slowly progressed as the short autumn season came to a close one morning with the arrival of a snow shower. Other than the rare flurries at altitude, Rho had seldom seen snow near or on the ground because his people followed summers from the northern to the southern hemispheres and back.

"The snow will prevent the raider from moving around so much because he will leave tracks," Alamos said. "But he's more likely to attack now. If Parvati is telling the truth about him, it makes no sense he hasn't tried already. He has food, but not enough to even begin winter, let alone survive and begin gathering food after the spring thaw."

Unlike Alamos, Rho didn't think a raider would have any knowledge at all of survival on the ground. Raiders depended upon robbery more than they did hunting, so they might not be much skilled in avoiding detection. Rho did an extra patrol and found a heavy human trail toward what was certainly the raider's main hide in a protected alcove in a drainage between two bare ridges. "We can use this information later to catch our enemy," he thought to himself. "And his tracks say he's not wounded."

So, near to the completion of repairs, Rho pushed himself and the others hard, working day and night and sleeping only brief periods until the airship was all but ready to launch, all except for repair of some of the electronics, including the radio. He was able to get 40% of the solar grid functioning, but the camouflage system was totally gone. Angelus and Alamos stood constant guard in shifts and kept him supplied with food and drink that Parvati organized.

The most exciting part of preparation was moving the glider to the dirigible. When the envelope had reached a sufficient level of inflation and the late-appearing leaks were patched, Rho rehearsed over and over with Alamos and

Angelus every move they would make, using a dummy tailhook. He said, “This is only a job for one person, but I want both of you to know how it’s done.” He then left everyone behind to keep watch while he hiked up to his old campsite. He had already transferred most of the equipment to the dirigible. Once the glider slid over the cliff and took off, he steered the short distance to the village.

By that time, Alamos had mounted to the dirigible’s top to arrange the arresting cable in the exact position Rho had demonstrated and they practiced earlier. As the glider swooped low over the envelope, almost close enough to scrape, Alamos jerked forward with a pole to align the cable with the glider’s path, but he slipped. Angelus, observing as back-up, sprang to grab the pole, but Alamos had already recovered and made the adjustment. He and Angelus dove flat, face-down to avoid being knocked off or decapitated by a wing. Rho had braced and dropped the hook, which caught. The rigging played out and stretched before it halted the glider with an unpleasant, violent jolt. Alamos and Angelus jumped to fasten the tie downs as Rho climbed out and said, “You are becoming quite the flying crew!” Alamos put on a false humble face, but Angelus beamed.

On the night before the departure, leaving Alamos behind to protect the dirigible, and he supplied with a warm, fragrant beverage that Parvati had prepared, Rho, Angelus, and Parvati took small lights and set out toward the raider’s hide, employing their best stealth techniques. Rho had given Parvati his hand e-m gun. She said she had never fired such a weapon before, but she had seen it used often enough that he thought it better she had it rather than nothing. Angelus didn’t want a gun, but carried a small horizontal preloadeding bow she had found in the raiders’ aircraft.

From the bottom of the drainage, they could see and smell a thin trail of grey smoke rising up from a campfire. Odd, Rho thought, that the raider would be so careless now after avoiding such an obvious give-away for so long. It took

an hour of creeping from cover to cover and watching to cross the last 50 meters. The camp showed more evidence of recent habitation, including the odor of fresh urine and matted and warm greenery of a bed. Whatever tools, supplies, or weapons the raider had, he had carried them with him.

"Here's another trail," Parvati said, using the small translator she always carried attached to her shoulder.

In tandem, they crept up the zigzagging trail to the base of a cliff face where the trail itself disappeared. Rho noticed the disturbed rocks and gravel to the side where a person might scramble to the top of the ridge.

Rho motioned for the women to gather in closer. "I don't know what's happening, but I fear that the raider may have carried the cannon to the top of these rocks. We can't see it from here, but I'm sure there is a straight line from there to the dirigible, even if it's a long way. Do you think, Parvati, that he would shoot our envelope just like we did theirs?"

"He might try. In revenge."

"Or, if only to kill us and seize what we have," Angelus said.

"Perhaps he could call his friends on our shortwave radio to return to pick him up."

Parvati looked up the rocky slope. "I don't think they would come back. I have an idea. Let me climb up. One can be quieter than three. You both return and prepare. If a raider is there, I'll kill him."

"But your baby?" Angelus cried. "What if you fall? What if he hurts you?"

"I won't fall. The raider will think I'm joining him. I'll tell him I want to help him."

"But what if you don't make it back?" Angelus said, sorrowfully.

"My life with the raiders was so bad, it was worse than death. The last weeks with you have been a joy. I'm content to have lived free again, even if a short while. But I won't fail, I'm sure. The raider couldn't have eaten well, trying to ration what he has. He will be weak from cold."

"Please," Rho said and fumbled in his pack. "Here is a handheld radio. The switch, here. Push to talk. Use your mobile translator. Let us know how you are—how it goes. I'll give one to Angelus. We'll wait for you."

"If you don't hear from me, you will know I failed, and you should leave."

"No. We'll wait right here. If we don't hear from you in a half hour, we'll climb up and flank him. It will take us an hour to make the climb without being detected," Rho said.

Angelus grunted twice quickly in negation. "I can make the climb silently and attack in half that time."

Rho took a breath to argue, but Parvati cut in. "It doesn't matter how long or quiet. The raider is deaf in one ear." Parvati didn't wait for a reply and began working up the steep mountainside. In about 40 minutes, she called on the radio. "He's not here. Hasn't been for days. You can return to the dirigible to get ready. I'll catch up."

"The cannon?" Rho asked.

"I'll take care of it."

Rho and Angelus trotted back to the dirigible as quickly as they could, though still wary, because the raider, deaf or no, could be anywhere. And he could be dead. About halfway back they heard what sounded like a rock bounding down a slope or cliffside behind them. They stopped to listen, heard no more, and continued on. The anchored envelope rose before them. While they were gone, the hydrogen had filled it enough to lift the gondola two meters above the ground.

"Alamos! Where are you?" Angelus called out as she approached the dirigible. "Oh, there. Wake up, you scoundrel." Wrapped in the down quilt, and swaying gently, sitting in the open gate of the gondola, Alamos had fallen fast asleep. He stirred slightly, but slept on.

The anchor cords vibrated a cheerful note when Rho plucked at them. It would be good to be aloft again, not just in a dynamic glider, but in a real home, stable and comfortable, drifting the sky as he had as a child—all of his life, in fact.

Rho jumped and caught ropes of the gondola, which

dipped a little with his weight, and pulled himself up and over the balustrade. He threw down a rope ladder and Angelus climbed up awkwardly, since the bottom of the ladder hadn't been tied down.

"You might as well have come with us," Rho said, pushing Alamos with his foot. Alamos jerked awake, looking around wildly and blinking hard. He sucked in a deep breath.

"We're fortunate that the raider didn't attack," Rho said. "Parvati should be back in a while. I'll explain later."

Rho checked on the hydrolysis and it was going well, but they still needed more hydrogen for a proper liftoff and long-term sailing. He turned the electric burners on to the maximum to begin warming the plain air compartments of the envelope. Angelus watched for the raider from the side opposite to Alamos, who, feeling guilty and ashamed about having fallen asleep, was now hyper-vigilant, jerking his body toward any movement or sound of a leaf in the brush.

A half an hour more processing should give enough hydrogen, Rho thought. The raider's vessel had no mechanism for measuring gas pressure and the weight/lift ratio, so he had to go with intuition, guesswork, and feel.

"Stop! Who are you?" Alamos shouted from his post, his voice shaking, laden with fear. "Oh," Rho heard him say. "It's Parvati. You're sooner than we expected."

She clambered up the ladder and pulled off her backpack. Rho came out to hear what she found. "The climb was not difficult, and it only took a few minutes," she said, breathing hard. "As I neared the top, I could see a long, dark object projecting over the rock. It turned out to be an e-m cannon mounted on a makeshift stand of stones, and aimed toward the envelope in the distance. There was no indication of anyone being there. The cannon was too heavy for me, but I brought this." She dug in her backpack and worked out a squarish, heavy object.

"The battery!" Rho said, pleased. "Smart to recover this. We can always use another cannon battery. He took it in his hands and turned it over. "It's a really old one. No way to

tell how much charge it's holding. But at least the cannon can't be used against us."

"I pushed it off the cliff."

"Okay," Rho said, pleased again, though regretting the loss. "We're double safe, then. Let's go," he said in another tone, commanding and matter-of-fact. While momentous in that it took weeks for the rebuild and repair, and he had not been on an airborne dirigible in a while, the launch was routine, something he had done hundreds of times before. He, Angelus, and Parvati released the anchor ropes simultaneously as he showed them, he doing two. Alamos dumped 500 kilos of gravel ballast and the ground fell away. Considering, Rho dropped another 100 kilos. The radiant heat of the electric burners warmed everything around them.

The rebuilding site and the village further to the west shrank below them, and the craft drifted up and south of the cliff face where the raider had camped. Why they had not seen him, why he had not attacked or tried to retake the airship, was a mystery.

The horizon to the east was forming as a ring of fire, and the hard edge of a brilliant night sky had softened. There was almost no wind, a perfect, quiet day coming. Angelus came up to Rho, who put his arm around her as they watched the ground pass below and the world open and spread around them. He kissed her on the neck.

"This is better than a dream," she said. "It's Heaven."

"Yeah, but it won't be easy. Nothing in life is easy. And in the air, always subject to wind and weather in this fragile home, we have so little control."

Aleut Winter House, Public Domain (NPS)

Chapter 9 Endnotes

They don't always use this much or any ballast, though they carry it in case of emergencies. This was a one-time thing after a thorough reconstruction to make sure the craft would fly upon its initial launch.

*The wedding invocation of Manteco is taken as a virtually direct quote of an Aleut Russian Orthodox priest in the wonderful documentary **Sacred Alaska**, released in 2024.

The liturgical description of the ancient world and the Great Chaos given by Manteco is taken and adapted from the books of **Genesis, **Revelation,** and elsewhere in the **Bible**.

Museum of the Aleutians, Summer 2024

Ten

Flying Again

The first day aloft again in a dirigible was for Rho like a homecoming, or would be if he could see his family, which he hoped to soon. The ever-changing sky and landscapes comforted him. He felt safe. The danger and risks, though always potentially deadly, were limited and familiar. He felt excited that he not only had a wife, but he also had a crew, if too small and untrained. Three members. His hope was to join the Annuary gathering in the southern hemisphere and then, as Angelus urged, return as soon as possible to the Alaskan coast where her people had gone for the northern winter.

Airships were navigated for the most part by changing altitudes to catch the varied air currents that would move the vessel toward the desired destination. A course would be carefully calibrated using his people's worldwide radio network that transmitted weather reports and wind patterns, information gathered from wherever airships happened to be. There were gaps in their information. Weather predictions were imprecise, as they have been for all the ages of humankind, but the system had worked for centuries well enough for his people to have survived and usually arrive where they needed to be.

When Rho turned on one of the raider's radios for the first time in testing before they left, and dialed through the frequencies, he was surprised to hear languages other than Inglosi. When he brought Parvati into the radio room, she shrugged her shoulders and said, "I've never heard any of those. They never let me in here."

Well, the server's translator worked fine, so the many languages weren't a problem. Rho heard just what he expected, news and conversation about business dealings intended for public access, and a few private conversations that for some reason hadn't been scrambled. Superficially, it might have been his own people's radio network, but it was

far more colorful in tone because these radio bands were not only what the raiders—the algolim—used, but also those people he thought of merely as the sundered brethren who still maintained a noble moral code. Often, the voices and content sounded dark and menacing. Now in flight, Rho entered codes for access to his own people's network and got in successfully. His codes were old, but hadn't reached their expiry dates. He thought about trying to contact his family, but, no, decided he should wait. Instead, given worldwide air movements, he found the probable location of the gathering, which this year would most likely be over the Indian Ocean, drifting toward Indonesia, and charted a course. He and his group would arrive toward the end of the event and surprise them.

A fear that had always been in the back of his mind now came on in full force. No one in his crew could assist him in navigating. First, Alamos was airsick much of the time. Angelus, despite supplemental oxygen, suffered from altitude sickness half the time. And, Parvati, more accustomed to air travel, just didn't know enough. Most of the time, she kept to herself in her cabin or on anxious lookout from the envelope, even if she wasn't needed in this job. But worse, all of them were on a 24-hour dark/light cycle, which meant they were incompetent and asleep fully 1/3 of the time. Genetically, Rho did not have such a cycle, and though he adapted to longer sleep periods while living on the ground, once airborne, he reverted to his natural pattern of frequent short naps. As far as changing altitudes and making connections, Rho was alone.

Two days into their flight, Angelus came to him and shyly said, "My new cycle is beginning. I think we can conceive now. It's a full moon, and there are other signs. We missed the last time because you were so busy and distracted."

Rho sighed and did not immediately reply.

"Did you hear?"

"I'm just tired. Sleepy, I mean. I've had to make four critical course maneuvers that took my full attention. I've not slept when I needed. I don't see how this will change."

"Can't you let Alamos cover for you?'

Rho was thinking of the potentially disastrous time when Alamos fell asleep while on guard duty. “Not in the next couple days, if we want to reach the Annuary gathering. It’s not just timing, but monitoring weather broadcasts and achieving precise altitudes.”

“Please come see me,” Angelus said. “I don’t want to lose time. You haven’t been in bed since we began flying.”

“I will. I will.” Rho said and gave her a kiss.

Rho stretched his legs and arms and touched Angelus, asleep and breathing quietly beside him. His feeling of complete physical and mental relaxation vanished in a moment with the shock of realizing he had fallen asleep. He pushed the lavender-scented red and blue duck down quilt aside and pulled on his garments. It was fully dark outside as he ran to the radio room to check the chronometer.

He had missed an altitude transition. And not by a little bit, but by three hours.

He ran the route-finding program to see what might be done. Not only would they miss the Annuary gathering, they would not be able to get to the Alaskan coast, not with this current circumnavigation. They’d have to pass clear around the globe to a certain position, recalibrate, and try again, and that would take weeks at best, if not a couple extra months. He brooded until the stars at the eastern horizon began to fade with the first sunrise glow, and he went back to bed. There was no point in tormenting himself further with sleep deprivation. He’d just have to trust to the winds as he had learned as a child that everything would be fine.

Around the common table later in the day, the crew—such as it was—discussed what should be done.

“I’m not so sure going to the gathering was a good idea in the first place,” Angelus said. “Will your people accept us?”

“I don’t know,” Rho said. “I’m optimistic. Hopeful.”

Alamos said, “We need to return home and help our

family with the late fishing harvest. I promised Mother and Father we'd join them."

"You just miss your girlfriend, that golden daughter of Sandego," Angelus said with a laugh.

"Maybe."

"What about you, Parvati?" Rho asked. "What do you think? Would you like to return to Nepal?" I could see if that's possible. If we stay there a while, weather might change enough whereby we could get from there to Alaska."

Parvati had been standing nervously against the bulkhead near the door. "My family is dead. There's no one I know there who is alive. I'm homesick, but my home no longer exists."

"Are you sure?" Angelus asked.

"I don't want to talk about it. There is something you might consider. The raiders or pirates, as you call them, might use a different weather reporting network. You might find a course to take you where you want to go, back to Alaska."

"Why didn't that occur to me?" Rho said, jumping up.

At that moment, Parvati said, "I have important news," in one tone, and then in another, "It's okay, now." Everyone looked at her in puzzlement, but they were even more mystified—and terrified—when a dark young man stepped into the radio carrying an e-m pistol in his hand and swinging it back and forth toward Rho, Angelus, and Alamos.

Rho was frozen for a second as he mentally processed that this was the missing raider, and with Parvati's help, he had stowed away on the aircraft. But in the next second, there was another surprise.

"I told you these people were kind!" Parvati said with loud alarm as her translator issued a feedback squeal when it interpreted into Inglosi. "Put the gun away!"

The raider did not move, but said, "They're killers."

Parvati reached behind her outside the compartment door, lifted a short club, and knocked the raider hard on the shoulder, sending him to the floor. In the process, the e-m gun fired, burning a hole through the wall of the room. Rho and

Alamos jumped at once, Rho seizing the pistol hand and Alamos pinning the raider. Rho wrenched the gun away, gave it to Angelus, and together he and Alamos bound the raider's hands and feet as he moaned in pain from the clubbing.

"We should toss him over the side,' Alamos said.

"I agree," Rho said, and they started dragging him toward the door.

"No, please don't," Parvati cried. "Let me explain. He's not evil. He's just confused."

"We should toss you with him," Angelus said bitterly.

Everyone fell silent, except for the raider's labored breathing and Parvati's quiet crying. The dirigible gently rocked and creaked as it always did in ordinary winds. A soft flapping sound penetrated the walls of the room, a piece of clothing hung up to dry.

Rho thought about what to do. "We need to calm down," he said.

Another quiet moment passed until Angelus said angrily, "What shall we do with them?"

"We'll descend and leave them somewhere—both of them," Rho said. "Give them provisions and a radio."

"No, please don't," Parvati said. "We couldn't survive. I want to stay with you."

"Then tell us your story, the whole story," Rho said sternly. "The truth. Who is this raider and why did you help him hide aboard our craft?" In a quiet voice he said to diffuse the tense atmosphere, "Will you bring us some refreshments, Angelus? Something to drink. Thanks so much, honey."

"What's honey?" she said, still smoldering, as she thrust the e-m gun into Rho's hands and marched out of the room, shaking her hands up and down.

"I'll tell you later," Rho called after her, and then said to himself, "Maybe I'll trade for some, if we get the chance."

"We had honey hunters in Nepal," Parvati said.

She looked around, expecting a response, but nobody cared about this in the moment.

Angelus returned carrying a board containing small

flasks of reconstituted currant juice. She handed the flasks around as Parvati began:

"This is JayJay. He is of the raider tribe, but he is not a bad one. He… he refused to torment me as the others did, and the rest beat him. When the raiders attacked your village, he ran and hid, and then when the dirigible burned and crashed, he came back in secret and gleaned food and the cannon."

"So, your deception about him being dangerous was a ruse to allow him to sneak aboard the aircraft," Alamos said.

"We didn't know you," Parvati said. "We thought you might kill him, so he hid. He would have died out there alone. After I learned how kind you were, I hoped to reveal him, but he didn't understand me and still thought you were a threat."

"And if we hadn't been kind," Alamos said, "you would have killed us, right?"

"That wasn't our plan, but I'm sure we would have tried to retake the airship by force."

"Is this why you had the club handy?" Angelus asked.

"My club?!" Alamos interjected.

"No, no! It was to knock JayJay down if he tried a trick. I didn't know he had stolen my gun."

By this time, JayJay had stopped grimacing in pain. He had been lying on his side and said, "Set me up, please."

Rho bent down and lifted JayJay's upper body and propped him against a crate. "Now, why should we keep you aboard?"

"I can help you fly," JayJay said.

Rho's focus turned inward as he suddenly realized the potential truth of JayJay's claim. He needed other crew members who were not only skilled at handling a dirigible, but who also had flying in their blood, people raised up with it from birth.

"Have you served as 'master,' Rho asked, "the person who oversees sailing operations and who charts the craft's course?"

JayJay looked downcast. "No. They never allowed me. I'm too inexperienced."

"Of course you are. If you had said yes, I'd know you to be a liar. On our family vessels, only the elders do this job solo, without collaboration, and we don't call them masters. What can you do?"

Angelus said quietly to Rho, "You're not an elder."

He answered back, "I do it because I must. So, what can you do, JayJay?"

"I can perform all maneuvers. I can fight the airship, if the cause is right. I cook. I'm a resourceful scrounger. I can fix your camouflage. And I fly a glider."

Rho smiled. "Really? A glider? Raiders don't have gliders."

"He's a good cook," Parvati said. "Better than me, except with the dishes of my own people."

"And he can sneak and hide," Angelus said, JayJay grinning sheepishly. "It's not funny. Where were you all this time?" she asked. "Show us."

Rho looked around the circle to Angelus and Alamos with a silent question. They all seemed to agree with giving JayJay a chance, so he nodded to Alamos, who proceeded to untie the captive. JayJay massaged his wrists and ankles and slowly rolled his shoulder, making awful faces as he did so. Angelus said, "I'll look at it. It might be broken. First, show us where you were hiding."

"Come with me," JayJay said. He moved surprisingly fast across the decks and through rooms. When he came to a ladder up around the envelope and began to raise his arms to climb, he cried, "Ow!" and grabbed his injured shoulder. "I can't. So, under the deck of the topside lookout is a trap door that opens to a compartment set into the gas chambers. It's a place we hide if we are ever boarded."

Alamos jumped onto the ladder and sped up it, as the rest waited behind. Rho thought that he was becoming a natural at this. Alamos returned a few minutes later and said while catching his breath, "It's nice. Small, but equipped with preserved food, water, what looks like air tanks, and weapons, lots of weapons, not only guns but knives and swords. The

only problem is that it smells bad, bad, bad."

"Yeah, sorry," JayJay said. "The chamber pot is overdue to be emptied. I should have warned you. But you'll be happy about this: I've got your missing e-m cannon here."

From then on, JayJay did not show any aggression, and actually he seemed to go out of his way to be submissive and helpful, so much so that Rho, Angelus, and Alamos relaxed their attitude toward him, and even became annoyed with his humility. Parvati said, "He acted this way on purpose with the raiders, too, even with his own family members, he told me, his brothers, and his father and mother. It was his survival method."

It was he who suggested to Parvati that Rho look for routes using the alternative radio network, which he did. It produced neither a route to the gathering nor to the Alaskan coast, but when he combined weather data from both networks, he did come up with several potential options to reach Alaska, most of them crossing territory Rho had never seen before. Rho and JayJay were flipping through schematics of the routes overlaying maps of the land masses and oceans.

"The most promising requires a 40-hour hold near the ancient city of Toronto," JayJay said. "It will take us seven weeks, total, give or take."

"That's a long time. Weather patterns change."

"Other routes take longer."

"We always avoided the large cities. My people felt that they were the centers of disintegration when civilization fell, and that evil still dwells in them. Only miners ever went to the cities to collect metals."

"I was in Toronto once, but it was two years ago. Half of it was under water."

"Could we anchor to a building? It has structures left?"

"A few. Enough. Though scavengers were busy when I was there."

Rho was nervous flying this far north so late in the year. Ordinarily, he'd be enjoying the southern hemisphere spring, but once they left the Rocky Mountains behind, the prairie autumn offered its own rewards—browns, reds, and oranges on the fields and foliage below. It was not long before they soared over long billows of grey smoke that clung close to the ground in the stiff, dry winds, and when the sun set, they could see the jagged lines of fires creeping from west to east. The flat, nearly featureless prairie gradually changed to low hills, forest, and lakes. One morning as Rho was gazing at the ruins of a decayed town by means of a quality, massive, stereo telescope that the raiders had once unearthed somewhere, he was startled to see through the scratched lenses an intact, ancient residential dwelling.

"We've got to look at this," he said to himself, and shouted orders for an emergency descent. The crew, wondering what was wrong, scrambled to obey. The dirigible dropped quickly and missed the mark only by a few hundred meters.

They sank anchors and geared up for the land traverse.

"Be sure your weapons are in order," Alamos said.

Angelus and Parvati stayed behind to guard the ship, and without thinking, the men instinctively stalked toward the dwelling in a defensive V formation. This place had been a neighborhood once, centuries ago. Now it was a meadow with humps of vines or soil that might have been brick fireplaces or rusted out vehicles. The dwelling rose up ahead of them.

"It could be contemporary," Rho said.

"It might be occupied," Alamos said. "Be cautious."

Up close, the bricks and tile roof could almost have been new, but the mortar between the red brick of the two story dwelling didn't look as intact and fresh as they first thought it was, and the inside showed it hadn't been lived in for a long while, but the state of the furniture and wall coverings indicated that it likely had been a home for people for hundreds of years after the collapse. The visitors

thoroughly explored every room and then went out by the back door onto a stone porch that overlooked a gently downhill sloping valley.

"This was a nice view, for someone," Rho said. They started back on foot, and before their pathway dipped over the top of a rise, Rho and the others turned around and looked back. While everything around it had crumbled and succumbed to nature, the house stood alone as a tombstone for a secure, safe way of life that was all but extinct.

"Someone built that house right," JayJay said.

"I wonder if he realized it would last for 1500 years?" Alamos said.

"Or two millennia," Rho said. "It might be standing for another five centuries."

Back at the dirigible, they launched quickly to remain on their timetable. Once they leveled out at their desired altitude, Rho told Angelus all of what they had seen and thought. She listened with a subtle hunger or yearning on her countenance.

"I could live in a house like that," she said. "It would be a fortress."

The three-day flight to the ruins of Toronto was drama-free, but as they drew near the city, JayJay asked to speak to the group. They gathered in the community room.

"Toronto is heavily defended, parts of it are," JayJay said. "Their cannons are mounted on the islands to the north and can't reach all of the ruins whose foundations are submerged, but the defenders might have a few guns among the ruins. I know, I should have mentioned this earlier."

The others pondered this for a few moments.

JayJay did not wait for a response. "If they recognize our vessel, we won't be welcome, because when we were here before, we attacked them."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Angelus said in anger. "We

could have tried another route."

"There weren't any other good ones," Rho said.

One of our crew members jumped ship here," JayJay said. "I thought we could contact him and he'd vouch for us, or me. He knew I didn't go along with the raiders. As we got closer, I started to worry it might not be easy to find him by radio."

"What's his name?" Rho asked.

"Lyonnelle."

"What's the language of Toronto?"

"A kind of Franco-Anglish."

Rho got on the radio, and it took him a few hours, but eventually he reached some kind of official representative, or port manager, of the Toronto colony, a female by the sound. She was not surprised by anything Rho told her, either of the capture of the raider's ship, or of the need for a route hold, or when she asked if he knew anyone at the colony, of Rho's request for her to check his reference.

"Tell him JayJay is back."

"We are a trading center," she said. "And as such, we do receive new people. We also get some frisky raiders, who more often than not, get themselves blown out of the sky. Give me a few minutes."

About a half hour later, the representative called back. "Okay. We found your Lyonnelle. He's in prison for capital murder and piracy."

"Oh," Rho said, disappointed. He started to awkwardly apologize to the lady for putting her through the trouble, but she interrupted. "Lyonnelle gave JayJay a decent character reference, for what it's worth. He's due to be drowned as punishment, so we don't see he has anything to gain by lying. So, what do you have to trade?"

Rho looked around the group, and everyone shook their heads.

"We don't have anything, I'm afraid."

"Then you can't anchor at the colony. You will have to tie up on one of the derelict structures. You're free to hold

there for as long as you need. Mind any other air traffic and don't do anything weird. We have twitchy trigger fingers."

The haunting, skeletal remains of what had been the architectural jewels of the great city of Toronto rose on the horizon the following day. On their left emerged several green islands covered in low, square, contemporary structures. Straight ahead, the corroded monument to a dead civilization jutted up from the water. Rho pedal-steered toward a nearby tower as JayJay dangled a grappling hook from the functioning bow and Alamo dangled one from the stern. The tower drifted nearer as he and Angelus pedaled as hard as they could. The breeze was fairly stiff. They were moving too fast for an easy mooring.

"Can't do it!" Alamo shouted. "Might as well save yourself the trouble."

Rho went to the rail as the building eased past them by a mere 30 meters below and away.

"I wish we had a harpoon," JayJay said.

"It looks like we have another chance or two. The next building is straight ahead, so no need to pedal, but…" He stepped two meters along the rail and dropped a ballast stone. Considering, he stepped another meter and dropped another. The vessel gradually rose up just in time to avoid colliding the gondola into the side of the building. The grappling hooks scraped and clattered across rotten concrete and rusty steel. One hook caught hold and ripped off a wooden framework of some kind. The other caught a large aluminum box with a fan in it, pulled it free of its mooring, and slowly dragged it over the roof. At the edge of the building, it plummeted down, stretching the cable and jerking the whole dirigible down. Anything loose on the airship sprang free of its base.

JayJay uttered an expletive and released the cable. The huge box with the gear trailing behind shrank as it fell. 14 seconds later, the faraway splashing noise reached them.

They had no time to regret their loss: valuable titanium hardware. Rho and Angelus raced back to the pedals as JayJay manned the remaining grappling rig. Alamos disappeared below to look in storage for another cable and hook.

The next tower was the last remaining one on their course. It seemed to be the tallest and best preserved of the former city. If they missed it, another option to catch their next connecting wind stream was to try an improvised sea anchor, something Rho had never seen done. Or, they might find an island within the range they needed to catch their next favorable wind stream.

There was time for the burners to give them the altitude they needed. Alamos had not yet returned. Suddenly, a heat wave roared past just under the bow, Rho's hair stood on end, and then he heard the whine and felt the concussive pressure of an e-m cannon blast. JayJay yelled another expletive.

"What happened?" Rho called.

"The dammed Torontons shot away our cable."

"On purpose?"

"A bad shot, I guess. They were only warning us not to monkey around."

Angelus, Rho, Parvati, and JayJay stood together at the rail as the vessel neared the last docking opportunity. "Where is Alamos? Angelus asked.

"Help me, please!" Alamos shouted. "I found another cable and hook."

Everyone jumped into motion, and in a jiffy they had bolted another cable reel onto the frame of the dirigible and let down the hook just as the structure floated near, dead ahead.

"Cable is too short!" Alamos yelled.

JayJay ran to the envelope controls and pulled a rope. "Releasing hot air," he shouted.

Everyone felt the momentary sickening weightlessness as the dirigible fell. Then the hook caught, the cable stretched, and the dirigible swung around, lifted, and came to a comfortable halt."

A moment's silence as they realized they had successfully anchored, and then everyone cheered and laughed.

"You realize that we might easily have found a nearby island or something to anchor on?" Rho said.

"But that wouldn't have been fun," JayJay answered.

"You said you can repair our camouflage."

"I'll start the first chance I get. I'm sure we have all the conducting wires and electronics we need on board."

To keep the dirigible from blowing back and forth on the long tether, the crew reeled themselves closer to the building, but not so close that anyone who happened to be in the tower might climb aboard uninvited. Rho and JayJay attached two additional anchors just as a half dozen humans emerged from the top of a stairwell and approached. They appeared to be armed only with bows and knives. Alamos trained a cannon on them. They looked at the cannon, and if they were intimidated, they did not show it, but one of them gestured aggressively and spoke gruffly in a language with round vowels and few consonants. JayJay shook his head and said, "I don't know exactly what he's saying, but I think they want to be paid for the mooring."

Rho called down, "What do you want in payment?"

The spokesman repeated some of what he just said.

Rho lowered a translator on a cord. The spokesman watched it descending with curiosity, but kept talking animatedly. As the translator came within an arm's reach, it suddenly picked up his voice and began giving his words in Inglosi. The spokesman stopped speaking and made a grab for the translator. Rho had anticipated this, but did not react quickly enough and the spokesman now had the valuable piece of technology in his hands.

"I will also take this in addition to gold," he said, smugly.

"We don't have any gold," JayJay said, "and the translator won't work for long without a special battery charger. We have no extras."

"Then give us an ounce of gold by next daylight, or we will cut you loose," the spokesman said and tossed the translator onto the roof. He and his fellows marched to the stairwell, giving fierce backward looks as they went.

"I wouldn't worry about them," JayJay said, as he prepared to slide down a rope to recover the translator. "They're conniving squatters who make a living taking apart this building and selling its scrap, the building that also happens to be their home."

"Will they cut us loose?" Angelus asked.

"Not if we shoot them."

"We're not doing that," Angelus said, and Rho agreed.

"Maybe by morning they will have changed their minds and be nice," JayJay said from the roof.

"The translators have built-in solar chargers. You told the guy it needed a separate one." Rho said.

"Really? I didn't know that," JayJay said, smiling and exaggeratedly turning the translator different angles for a closer look, but no one thought he was funny.

The crew kept guard in watches the same as they always did while in flight. The sequence through the night was Angelus first, then JayJay, Alamos, Rho, and lastly Parvati. Rho, not wanting to make another mistake, slept lightly. When Alamos woke him for his shift, he was alert immediately.

"JayJay is gone," Alamos said. "And Parvati. JayJay woke me at the right time, and before I knew it, they had slid down an anchor rope and disappeared down the stair. I knew there was nothing we could do about it, so I let you sleep."

"I wonder what they are up to. Did they take their personal stuff?"

"I checked their quarters," Alamos said. "Not that I can tell anything from them. There are a few odds and ends left behind. But they both were wearing bulky packs."

"Hmmm. Maybe they're abandoning us. We really don't know them well."

Rho hoped that they would return in time for Parvati's shift, but they didn't show up. The extra shift was not a particular hardship for him, because he could nap later, but it being the last of the night, he had to be especially observant in case the squatters tried to carry out their earlier threat. The sun was well up and long past noon when he heard voices echoing from the stairwell. Everyone was on hand with their e-m weapons ready. Rho had told them that none of the squatters should be hurt deliberately, but to aim for the ground around them.

"We could destroy the stairwell, and then they'd be trapped up here," Alamos said.

"I'm sure they could find a way down, but, yeah, they wouldn't like to lose their stairs. That's only a last resort."

The voices sounded cheerful as they grew louder, quite unlike unhappy people intent upon negotiating a hard bargain. And indeed it was talkative JayJay, Parvati, and a short, silent, muscular squatter who followed, struggling under a heavy load.

"We've got your grappling hook back, one of them," JayJay called out. "Lower a basket and pull us up."

"Good," Rho said, his expression angry. "But you left without telling us. Parvati skipped out on her night watch."

Alamos sent down the basket and winched them up one at a time, the heavy hook first and JayJay last, after he paid the porter a small bronze coin of some sort. The porter inspected the coin, weighed it in his hand, smiled a toothless smile, and ran off and down the stairwell like he couldn't wait to spend his riches.

"We recovered your hook," JayJay said once on board. "Be glad. And I brought you presents." He and Parvati slipped off their packs and JayJay triumphantly pulled out a largish cloth-wrapped parcel and set it on the deck. He peeled back the cloth and inside was a mound of woolen things.

Parvati handed out the contents. "Socks," she said.

"Three pairs of Merino wool socks for everyone," and she handed the gifts to Rho, Angelus, and Alamos, as well as keeping sets each for themselves.

"What's in your backpack?" Angelus asked Parvati, who flushed and blinked rapidly.

"Baby things," JayJay said. "Diaper cloths, blankets, soft soap, and such things."

Parvati began pulling items from her pack, and there were knitted baby caps, booties, sweaters, and gowns. Lastly, shyly but with beaming joy, she pulled out a beautiful, hand-made stuffed cloth doll.

"Why so many baby things?" Alamos said. "One baby can not possibly need so much."

Parvati looked at Angelus, but said nothing.

"Parvati knows," JayJay said. "She can tell, somehow. Smell, tone of complexion. I don't know. All the women in her tribe had babies."

Angelus took Rho's hand. "I was about to tell you. We're expecting now."

Rho felt tears welling up and wiped them away. Babies were so rare among his people that he didn't know anything about preparing for one, let alone how to take care of them. Wasn't his whole purpose in leaving his family to find a mate who he could love and who would give him and his people children? And now it was happening. But he hadn't really considered that other earthbound people would join him. Here he was collecting his own family group of those who had been strangers, even people whom his family thought were less than human. All of this was happening now at the same time. He soon recovered enough to speak and said, "This is wonderful, Angelus, and JayJay, but you must tell me what you traded for the things, or did you steal them?"

JayJay stood up straight and looked Rho in the eye. "We are not thieves. We traded goods for them."

"What, then? What did you trade?" Angelus asked.

"I gave the squatters gold, as they asked. Not as much as they wanted, in fact only slivers, but they were satisfied. I

traded raw wool for the socks. Parvati can spin and knit, but we don't have tools, and besides there's not much time before winter. I have other things, too… antibiotic herbs, and—"

Rho could see JayJay was hoping to avoid further inquiry, which prompted him to cut in. "You must show me all your hiding places. I need to know what we have onboard. From here on, we will act with consensus, especially in matters affecting other persons, unless there's an emergency or a controversy that I must decide alone. More importantly, no more surprise absences. We need to be able to rely on you. Do you agree?"

JayJay and Parvati both nodded yes.

"And I must ask of the relationship between you two."

Parvati flushed again, but this time she found her voice to say, "We are pledged to each other. But we are waiting for my baby to be born before we join."

JayJay stood next to Parvati and put his arm around her waist. She squirmed away as he said, laughing, "I'll be the adopted father of the baby."

And then Rho noticed Parvati was wearing new red ruby ear studs. A strange happiness again welled up inside his heart, and he could see that Angelus was similarly affected. She put her hand on Parvati's back. Alamos rolled his eyes as if to say, "Hasn't all this been perfectly obvious?" but what he actually said was, "Let's get the ship tour started. I want to see what treasure we've been carrying."

"I forgot," JayJay said and rummaged again in his pack and pulled out two additional items, stone knives for the other two men.

Rho carefully turned his black, chiseled piece over in his hands. "It's sharp, sharper than our steel implements. I've never seen a thing like this before."

"It's made of obsidian, volcanic glass from the west," JayJay said. "They have excellent knappers in Toronto."

Eleven

Toronto

The raider's dirigible was larger than any of Rho's family vessels, in part because, unlike his people, who travelled in small craft that often teamed in family flights of multiple aircraft, the Raider's vessels carried large crews that they found useful in robbing and pillaging. So, it was only a mild surprise to Rho to discover the many hideaways and corners, including passages with barely enough space for a person to crawl through that opened into compartments within the envelope itself, albeit isolated from the toxic hydrogen or inert helium by an impermeable membrane and holding ventilated breathable air. More surprising were the goods the hiding places contained.

As Rho already knew, part of the stash was wool, primarily various grades of merino, and a whole compartment was devoted to this, even if the supply was low. "We were going through a lean time," JayJay said. "That's why the raiders were so desperate."

Many of the compartments held the usual trade goods of dried meats, a small quantity of low-grade feathers, rare earth metals, a little gold in slivers, aluminum, furs, and to everyone's horror, what looked like bags of human hair.

"What's this for?" Alamos asked?

"I don't know," JayJay said. "I'd guess they are trophies stolen from somewhere. We were bad, but we didn't scalp people. I'll toss it. Let me show you my own stash. The Raiders never knew of this." He led them to the top of the dirigible, to his personal stowaway hide. Inside, JayJay faced a blank wall. He fiddled with what appeared to be a seam of fabric that peeled away to uncover a hidden, sealed door. "I made this door and room myself." When he opened the door, the air of the outside compartment filled with mingled scents of perfumes and mints. JayJay turned on a light.

"What is this?" Angelus said in awe.

My apothecary and perfumery. I collect medicinals and scents of all sorts, healing herbs, and essential oils. Particularly valuable are the poppy, coca leaves, and certain cacti buttons, and mushrooms."

"Don't those make you sick?" Angelus asked.

"Yes," Rho said. "Most do. They were a plague in ancient days before the floods."

"People abuse them, for sure," JayJay said. "But each has its value. Most of my stock is neither addictive or mind-distorting. Try this." He proceeded to give each of the others a piece he cut off from a brown, waxy block. "I mixed it with honey."

Rho nibbled a small chip from his piece and broke into a smile. "I've never tasted this before, but I know what it is. It's safe, I guarantee," he said and pushed the rest of his piece into his mouth and sucked on it. The others followed suit.

"What is it?" Alamos asked, smiling, which let a little of the brown juice dribble down his chin.

"The ancients called it chocolate," Rho answered.

JayJay and Parvati retired to their quarters to rest. Rho was checking the weather to see if conditions had changed. The early, original alternative route required a hold in Toronto of 40 hours and nothing needed adjusting except that the time had lengthened by a couple hours. There were 27 hours left to wait before they could leave.

A knock on the doorway. It was JayJay.

"Up so soon?" Rho asked.

"Can't sleep. Remember my acquaintance who gave us a reference?"

Rho nodded. "You called him Lion. In prison."

"Lyonnelle. I want to rescue him. They're going to execute him tomorrow."

Rho had seen moving images of the megalopolises of the ancients. Toronto had been one of those massive cities, and Rho was shocked by both the similarity and differences the present settlement of Toronto had with the city at its peak population and size. The settlement occupied a half dozen islands north of the towering ruins of the old city.

As Rho, Alamos, and JayJay neared the docks in their hired, unlicensed water taxi, the horrible smell of human waste wafted before their noses amidst the shifting breezes. The oarsman, wearing a faded red striped shirt and a funny, flat-topped hat, stopped rowing to sprinkle drops of mint oil on a handkerchief, which he tied around his nose and mouth. “I never get used to this,” he said in a French dialect. “It gets worse at the water’s edge.”

A dozen boats of different displacements, among them three gondola-sized sailing vessels—the others propelled by human strength—were in process of arriving, departing, or discharging or loading their goods and passengers. At the moment, there were no dirigibles tied down to the steel mooring posts set at the outside edge of the stonework piers.

For Rho, it was as if the thousand or so residents here consciously imitated what they imagined to be the ideal for human communities, complete with all its negative aspects. The people all were crowded together in low buildings that had been repaired or built new from scrap and bricks. Dogs and pigs ran freely in the streets that were irregularly paved or of packed earth or black, soggy mud, depending upon the drainage. People bustled up and down on wooden sidewalks in makeshift costumes. Colorful flowers he had never seen before had been planted in wooden boxes at intervals. The settlement even had the trunks of dead trees mounted with electric lights powered from solar cells that were roosting on top of the buildings, the cells competing for space with e-m cannons. Equidae in harness pulled carts of goods up the hill from the waterfront to the marketplace in the park-like square

in the center of the assortment of buildings. Rho felt agitated and vulnerable being in the midst of so many people on the ground, a place for him that almost always posed danger, thus requiring vigilance. He especially felt the lack of weaponry, as before they left the dirigible, JayJay told him that, while many of the residents were armed with primitive, kinetic weapons, as Rho could now see, bringing an e-m gun was neither necessary nor prudent. "We want to be unnoticed," JayJay had said. "A gun will be noticed. I carry a hidden knife."

Before them at the north side of the square, sat the settlement's governmental headquarters, a building of steel and glass, obviously constructed from scrap recovered from the skyscrapers and three stories high at its center with one-story wings at each side. It was the tallest building of the settlement, and not bad to look at, as retro buildings go. Next to the building and seemingly as tall, loomed a heavily corroded steel scaffold, probably much older than the building, fresh ropes hanging over its platform and swinging in the otherwise imperceptible ground wind. A pool of water had been dug below.

"Wait here," JayJay said, and cinching his fat backpack tight, jogged up the steps to the front doors.

Rho and Alamos nervously looked around before spying reassuring benches at the edge of the square next to a gazebo that was occupied by a foursome of musicians taking a break, smoking tobacco.

"You watch for JayJay," Alamos said. "I'm exploring." He jumped up from the bench and wandered over to a fruit vendor.

Rho felt a dread. The settlement, and especially the marketplace, were full of menace for him and Alamos. Anything could go wrong. When he first heard the idea of rescuing someone, he had imagined blowing up a wall and fighting, and that had not bothered him nearly as much as now seeing Alamos talking with a girl with long, curly hair and wearing tight-fitting black shorts, a loose-knit sweater, and fur-lined boots, and who swayed her body provocatively.

He wanted to get away from here as fast as possible.

Alamos and the girl began walking away from the fruit stand at the same time as when Rho spotted JayJay and another person descending the steps of the government building. He trotted to Alamos, took him by the arm, said, "Let's go," and began moving him away.

The girl pouted and Alamos called back to her. "We'll come back by your booth later, okay?"

When JayJay saw that Rho and Alamos were on their way to them, he and the stranger began walking away quickly to the west. The stranger's long, thick, tawny mane of hair had been cut away on one side of his head. Rho and Alamos caught up to them and fell in step. They walked on and on wordlessly, moving from the commercial center into the residential neighborhood, and on into an agricultural area. Rho noticed that JayJay's backpack was floppy and empty. At last they passed through a muddy yard full of domestic jungle fowl running around and entered a ramshackle thatched wooden structure that resembled a human dwelling, but it could have been a barn for animals, because it had stalls and dusty straw instead of rooms and furniture.

Everything that followed their arrival here happened so fast, Rho could hardly take it in, but before he knew it, he was carrying away a smelly child with matted hair. She clung to him so hard he didn't need to hold on. Alamos and JayJay both were carrying children, one a baby, while two women and a young adolescent carried awkward bundles. Feeling like everyone in the settlement looked at them, they hurried along through the square and down to the docks where the taxi man waited for them in his boat. He helped load everything and everyone on board and said, "I suggest that one of you men grab that other set of oars." Before they could get away, the girl from the marketplace dashed up with a small brown cloth bag and set it inside the boat. "For the children," she said.

The boat pulled away and their girl waved.

"What's inside?" Rho asked.

Alamos, still watching the girl, held up a rough-

skinned yellow and green ball.

Rho took it and sniffed. “Oranges. They might be oranges. They’re edible.”

JayJay started peeling one, but the adolescent snatched it from him and handed it and the other fruits around to the children, who, after tossing their rinds over the side, and stuffing sections into their mouths to suck, fed pieces to the intrigued, insatiable baby.

The boat moved sluggishly away from the stinky wharf until the taxi man swore and said, “Pitch in there, will somebody?” Alamos awoke from his smitten daze and jumped into a seat. He fumbled with the oars, and before long got into rhythm with the taxi man. Not used to this work, Alamos tired quickly and JayJay took his place. The new women and the stranger held tightly to the children and to the edge of the gunwales. The rowers pulled hard, and when they at last could see the base of the tower that their dirigible was moored to, the taxi man said, “Someone’s following us.”

Rho, who was taking a turn at the oars, said, “And someone else is following the first someone.”

Alamos stood up and looked. “It’s Yemoja in front. I think she went back to grab clothes and mementos. She’s paddling her kayak and she’s fast. Ummm, behind her is a boat moving on its own.”

“Police, in an electric speed boat,” the taxi man said. “I’ll take care of them.” He stopped rowing, pulled out a handheld radio, mashed the talk button, and said, “We’ve got one.” A voice came back, “Thanks.”

A few minutes passed as the three boats moved across the water—the destination building coming nearer, the kayak catching up with the taxi, and the racing speedboat catching up with the other vessels. Rho could now clearly see the faces of a pair of policemen holding weapons. One of them lifted his rifle to fire and then lowered it, the other policeman looking ahead at the water. The speedboat slowed slightly and then violently flipped front to back, landing upside down, and sending the yelling policemen flying bodily across the water.

The taxi man grinned. “We’ve got an underwater defense all through these channels. Cables, nets, and even a two-man submarine. And that service will cost you extra.”

One of the women asked, “Can the police swim?”

“They should survive okay. One of our guys will pick them up, give them a little gratuity, and take them back to the main island. We don’t kill them because the city would retaliate with prejudice. We recover the boat and sell it back to the police.” The taxi man looked across the water and said, “We better start moving. The police will send a larger force now and they’ll be more cautious.”

The party—the taxi and the just-arrived kayak (a two-seater canoe-kayak hybrid) beside it—continued to the base of the tower, with Alamos and the new girl smiling back and forth. Rho mumbled to himself, “We’ll sort all this out later.”

They disembarked and Alamos asked the barrel-chested men eating folded sandwiches at a makeshift table in the vacant windows at the water’s edge, “Can we get the kayak winched or carried to the top?” The men spoke in an untranslatable dialect among themselves and then agreed, and after JayJay paid the taxi man and them, everyone began the long trudge up the stairways.

“Who are those men?” Rho asked JayJay as they fell into a slow rhythm of rest-stepping. “They weren’t squatters.”

“Free divers from the city. They’ve been brought in from somewhere to explore the submerged levels of the towers for treasure. They hold their breath. They get along with the squatters. They get along with everyone.”

“Now, who do we have here and what’s the story?” Rho said on board the dirigible after the children’s faces and hands had been washed and everyone fed. And the kayak stowed aboard. Rho hadn’t wanted the whole crew involved in examining the new people, so he had asked only JayJay and Angelus to join him with the family group. He’d talk with Alamos and the

new girl next.

The rescued man fingered the sheared side of his scalp and began: "Thanks for saving us. They were shaving my head for the drowning when Jay magically walked into the jail. My name is Lyonnelle and these are my épouses, Kay and May, and our children," and then he stopped.

"Don't make me ask questions," Rho said. "We don't have much time."

JayJay took over. "Lyonnelle was convicted of murder because he had defended himself and his family. Intruders had entered their home and attempted to steal his tools. His wife Kay, grabbed onto a rake handle and wouldn't let go. One of the intruders knocked her down. Lyonnelle struck the intruder with the blunt edge of an ax, and the others ran away."

Rho turned to Lyonnelle. "Is this true?"

Kay said angrily, "It is, but the intruder my husband hit didn't die. The police lied."

"You were living in that barn?"

Lyonnelle nodded. "It's our home."

"What is your trade?"

"We're farmers," Kay said. "We grow vegetables and grains. The tools are our life. We brought them with us today."

"The police stole our cows," May said.

"Well then, you can go. JayJay, please stay a moment."

"So, you will vouch for them?" Rho asked JayJay.

"I do. Kay and May are my sisters. Toronto is my home. We grew up here."

"Oh…" Rho said, now understanding.

"So," Angelus said, "if these farmers turn out to be bad ones, we'll pitch you over the side and drop them and their children at the first arable land."

JayJay smiled and said, "Sounds fair."

At that moment, Alamos' voice boomed through the walls of the cabin, "Police are below. We need to leave!"

Rho jumped to his feet, and as he rushed out the door, he said over his shoulder to JayJay, "Keep the newcomers out of our way, especially the children." He did a quick mental

calculation and realized they were launching early, but still within a reasonable window to catch the various winds around to the coastline of Alaska, where Angelus's people were spending the winter. His wife was running behind him, and once she took her station at a cannon, he called from where he stood near an envelope rope, "The interview with Alamos and his girlfriend will wait."

The men of the building untied the moorings and ran to their usual hiding places. Rho let the dirigible drift over the void and released warm air from the envelope. The dirigible dropped and he immediately fired the burners to begin slowing their descent. It would be risky, but he hoped to be as close to the water as possible. They'd need to stay low to avoid being hit by the long-range cannons back on the islands. The bottom of the huge gondola actually dipped harmlessly into the water and dragged along for a few moments before rising up, but Rho had other things to consider because one of the policemen who had been left to guard their boats began firing at them with a strange popping percussive-combustion weapon, and Rho returned with small e-m arms fire. A growing whine and then the following blast from Angelus and her cannon obliterated the policeman and pretty much everything in his vicinity. The other police were deep in the building somewhere, unreachable by her fury.

The dirigible rose, drifted over the water, and caught a fresh breeze moving east away from the city. Rho stayed low, keeping the derelict skyscraper between them and the settlement's keen-eyed cannon captains.

The skeletal, broken towers gradually receded into a frame of pure white-and-blue sky and rolling waves.

They were safe again.

Twelve

Winter Camp

Rho sat at his onboard server and typed out his notes of the day. He didn't log consistently, but with so many new people—ten—he needed a written inventory:

Rho
Angelus
Alamos
Parvati, the Nepali girl who is pregnant, she says
JayJay, the stowaway
The girl in the kayak with the oranges. I forgot her name.
Lyonnelle, the rescued farmer
Kay, Lyonnelle's first wife and JayJay's sister
May, Lyonnelle's second wife, who is also JayJay's sister

Plus six children, one a small baby, and one an adolescent female. Acquire their names and which is the mother.

Not figuring in the pre-natal children known and unknown to him, Rho contemplated that the number of his family—and he considered anyone onboard his dirigible to be family since his people historically almost never took passengers, and he didn't know what else to call them—his family, had just tripled. He might have been happy with all the new people except that none of them had any flying experience, and only three: the girl with the kayak, the rescued farmer, and perhaps the oldest child, would have time to help fly the aircraft, and only if they had the capacity to learn any aspects of flying and navigating. The rest would be occupied in taking care of the children or with being children. Children. Six of them. And at least two more in-utero. In his whole life, he had never seen so many little ones onboard at one time, and seldom that many in one place at the annual gathering.

Children. The first chore was setting up manropes to

keep them from falling overboard, because once they lost their fears of strangers, of their new situation, and of having no ground in easy reach below, they would forget all danger and run and skip about as if their only risk would be a fall of a couple meters. Sure, they could climb through the manropes, but at least there would be some delay, and an adult might have a chance to stop any wild frolicking. He set Alamos upon completing the rigging task.

Once he was sure of their course of flight and being at the proper altitude, Rho needed to learn about the new people, their own histories, and what they intended. What their plans might be, or if they had any plans beyond escaping Toronto in a hurry.

The farmer Lyonnelle, his wives Kay and May, and his multiple children were no mystery, as he discovered through casual conversation. They were all they appeared to be, which was significant, they being able to produce food from the ground, but they also appeared to be nothing more than they appeared: intelligent, curious, and uncomplicated. Educated to the limits of their experience. No secrets here. They wanted to resettle somewhere. Lyonnelle by now had his whole head shorn. Rho had called them in to his working office together for a brief interview.

The children were surprisingly clean now, and well behaved, apart from the baby who grabbed everything within reach—like Rho's small compass—and popped it into its mouth. The adolescent girl held a fat, live, rusty-orange jungle fowl in her arms, and she gently stroked the feathers of its back. Rho didn't really want livestock on board, but he figured if it hadn't so far been a problem that caught his notice, it probably wouldn't ever. He was suddenly touched by her affection for the creature because it reminded him of his brother Deneb and his falcons, and this gave him an encouraging idea he'd have to follow up on later.

"What's your name?' he asked her.

She smiled, and without hesitation, said, "Lafayette." It means, 'fairy."

"'The petite fairy,'" said Kay, who was most certainly her mother. The girl only continued smiling, not minding the mild correction. "We call her Fay."

"She's not petite anymore," the father said.

"Of course," Rho said, wondering how confusing it would be if all the children's names rhymed with the others and the two mothers' names. And the uncle's.

So, Rho next called in the girl with the kayak. He asked Angelus and JayJay to join them.

Unlike the dubious, discreditable costume they saw her in originally, the girl was wearing the traditional seasonal feminine garb of the city: loose-fitting pantaloons, the upper third of them covered with a heavy blue skirt, a close-woven blouse under layers of vest and what was a heavy silk jacket, in neutral browns and tans with accents and embroidery of vermillion. She had braided her hair. Her fur-lined boots were the same, though with sawn-off heels. Her clothes were fairly new and unfrayed, but not entirely clean. As was obvious by the smell of rancid oil and perhaps fresh algae or decomposed kelp, she had not bathed for some time.

At Angelus' open-ended question, or rather statement of, "We are glad you are with us, and we wish to hear your story," the girl took on a hardened expression and her body tensed. She remained silent, but as Rho and the others waited patiently and looked away rather than stared at her, the girl's tension melted and her body relaxed.

"Would you like some tea?" JayJay asked. "It's not hot, but is flavorful and sweet."

Rho handed out balsa cups and poured the cooled tea, and the girl waited for this welcome and friendly ceremony to finish. She took a sip, then another, sighed, and began.

She had been part of a mariner society, from childhood sailing the ocean in wooden boats with her fishing and trading people. She had grown tired of the monotony and the harsh, unstable life on the sea, facing storms, cramped quarters, and sometimes motionless doldrums, and had run away with a younger boy from her clan. If life was hard on the sea, she

said, it was doubly hard on land. They tried trading, acting as go-betweens, but the sea-going people—her own people—now shunned them, and besides, they had nothing of their own with which to trade. Soon, the boy abandoned her, leaving for some other country, and she had no means to survive. No means, other than to rent her body, which she did to pay for passage to North America, and which she still had been doing under the protection of a government official who took a portion of her earnings and had anyone beaten who even imagined he could engage in cruelty or disrespect, or try to cheat her. She hated this life, and when she met Alamos today and learned he had been an indigenous, but had taken up with one of the mysterious, elusive skyers who had run away from his own people for an indigenous girl, Alamos' sister in fact, the mariner said to herself they were her kind of people and she would join them.

She paused and waited, which coincided with knocking and the voice of Alamos calling through the closed door, "Why have I been excluded from this meeting?"

Angelus stepped outside, and those left behind heard muffled, intense voices. She came back inside and said, "He understands now. That we needed to make an objective evaluation."

"About me?" the girl said, her eyes smoldering. Though she ordinarily appeared humble and crushed in her spirit, underneath the surface was a deep self-assurance, almost arrogance, except that she didn't project any sort of superiority, only a knowledge, or a pretence of such that she was immensely proficient in her native environment, even when she was far from that environment. "You know nothing about me. How could you make an objective evaluation?"

"Then let me ask you the same question," Rho said. "How can we evaluate you? I have never heard of sea-going people before now. I have flown above a good amount of ocean of the world my whole life and never noticed any seagoing vessels, not any at all. You might be lying."

"Did you look for them?" The girl searched in her pack

and pulled out a black tube that she pulled and lengthened. "A terrestrial telescope. It brings faraway objects into…"

"I know what a telescope is."

"Did you ever look for people on the sea?"

Rho searched his memory, bringing up images of an infinite procession of an infinite variety of clouds and skyscapes, and then the ridges and valleys of mountains, and their shadows, or flat plains dotted with thousands of blue lakes. He had never paid much attention to the mostly featureless surface of water and scattered islands. It was not possible to land on water, so, except for the rare, usually unfruitful attempts of fishing while in flight, he and his people ignored it. They did not perceive that which held no value to them, other than as a generator of the weather.

"I've seen gigantic ships with white sails," JayJay said under his breath.

Rho took the telescope and left the cabin. The rest of them followed him to the rail. Alamos spotted them and trotted over to watch. Rho scanned below for a quarter of an hour as the others chatted quietly. At last, he collapsed the telescope and, shaking his head, gave it back to the girl.

She indignantly extended it again with a snap and swept the horizon, walking the circuit of the dirigible. Halfway around, she stopped. "There. Just nicking the edge of the sea, between sea and sky. The high sails sparkling. The hull is yet down. It's far away."

Rho again took the telescope and lined it up with her pointing finger. "I see it. I see it."

The airship was moving in its direction, and presently, as they rounded a short arc of the planet, the full diminutive majesty of the vessel came into view.

"It is made of wood," the girl said.

"Yes. Okay. I know you better now. Thank you. What's your name?"

"Yemoja."

"Do you know the ancient history of your people?" Rho said and passed the telescope to Alamos who had been

crowding him, trembling for a turn to look. Alamos took a quick glance through the eyepiece and then gave his full attention to Yemoja.

"My father always said we mostly are descendants of Yoruba pirates, but we are a mix. Some ancestors are Polynesian, others are British. Our stories say we took to the sea in stolen boats and learned sailing from the crews, who were…

"Where did you learn to build boats?" Alamos asked, butting in.

Yemoja paused a long time, thinking. "I don't know if it's true, but the stories say a kidnapped teacher taught us. He had once taught shipbuilding in a school for adults, not the behemoth metal hulks of the ancient world, but from a tradition far older, long before the fossil-fuels machines. When the world grew chaotic, he sought us out and offered to help us, to volunteer, but we kidnapped him and his family, along with his students. That's the story, which says he was happy by the end of his life. That teacher is one of my ancestors, so my father always said."

The small group broke up, each person moving to their assigned tasks. Angelus passed Alamos and took him by the sleeve of the jacket. "You mustn't touch her, the new girl. She probably carries a disease, a pox. I know for sure she carries lice."

Alamos stared at her hard. "I plan to marry her when we arrive home, if our father approves. We've already agreed."

"What?" She stared back at her brother, unblinking. He continued a fierce stare for a few moments and turned his eyes to the horizon, but without any change in his expression. By this Angelus, knew his resolve was absolute and he would marry the girl, whatever anyone else thought. She softened, "JayJay believes he has cures in his collections, if she will submit to the medicine."

"She will. I'll talk to her. She's proud, but not stubborn. It'll help her feel better."

Rho had been mistaken about the need for manropes, because by the second day, the children, those who were not merely crawlers or a baby-in-arms, had overcome their extreme caution and reached, then exceeded the skipping-around point, exceeded as in they began climbing the sides of the envelope, which was laced with ropes that extended over its entire surface, from those that connected it to the cabins to the very top. They even climbed through the manropes and under the gondola. Their parents first uselessly commanded, then warned, then fell back to sighing in vain, because the children could not be suppressed. Accustomed as they were to roaming freely on land and sometimes in water, the level, floored decks and cabins of the dirigible simply were incapable of supplying the space they needed. More agile than most people Rho had seen on the ground, the children never lost their grip or faltered in their wild skylarking until the parents and other adults (apart from the cautious, protective father) became as unconscious of the potential danger as the children were. Rho noted to himself that not having been raised to adopt the slow, deliberate pace that his people followed while in the air, these children showed a level of vigor and energy he had seldom seen before.

Rho spent his free daylight time outside, bundled up against the cold of the northern winter jet stream while scanning the water and islands below with Yemoja's telescope. He was surprised at the ships and boats he saw, because all his life until now, he had never considered that they even existed. You don't see what you don't need, he thought, but also what you don't believe. His fascination led him to fly at lower altitudes when possible, not enough to disturb their planned course, but it did slow progress.

As they circumnavigated, when at lower altitudes over land, here and there he saw sparsely inhabited villages surrounded

by garden patches, agricultural fields, and livestock, and here and there signs of a scrabbling human civilization subsisting within the antediluvian ruins. Once again, he contemplated his growing clan and then wondered how his parents were. So much had happened with him. It had been, he calculated, merely three months since he left them. They could even have passed by quite near and he missed seeing the faint, quivering air that indicated their camouflaged airships. Or they could have been hiding in clouds. What would his father think of his wife, one of those "animal-humans" that his people had fled from centuries ago, and of Rho taking onboard a raider and all these rough people from the surface?

Lyonnelle, the farmer, often joined him at the rail, taking turns at the telescope and interpreting the best he could from the unfamiliar overhead perspective, what they were seeing. Rho did not fully believe him when he said certain fields grew rice, or barley, or vegetables, and the figures and their shadows were domesticated sheep, or horses, or camels. The common English and French names for these creatures were as unknown to Rho as the creatures themselves. They never had hunted the central latitudes.

When JayJay could spare time from repairing the ship's camouflage, he also joined Rho at the rail, and while he didn't care much about agriculture and the biological world, his fascination lay in the ancient cities, in the engineering, but especially what might be salvaged or reclaimed. One day, he brought a wide double tube that was nearly the same length as Yemoja's telescope. "I was sorting out a pile of rubble, cleaning an unused compartment for a children's playroom, and found this. It was moldy within and without, so I disassembled it and cleaned it. Let's try it out, okay?"

"Oh, yes! I remember. The stereo telescope. I misplaced it. Thanks for cleaning it."

The stereo images jumped so much closer, and were focused crystal clear, and Alamos, Yemoja, and the others spent hours, in shifts, studying the land below. JayJay brought a portable server out and they pored over the old maps,

guessing at the pronunciation of the names of the cities below. "No wonder civilization came crashing down when the waters rose," he said. "Most of the capitals of the nations were situated on the coasts, along bays and major rivers, only a few meters above the level of the sea."

"How much has the water receded over the centuries, if at all?" Rho asked, adjusting the stereo telescope as he focused on yet another tall, cadaver-of-a-tower below.

JayJay shook his head. "I'll ask Yemoja. Maybe her people know."

"There! What are those people doing?"

JayJay took the bi-telescope and peered through the eyepieces as he swung the instrument to and fro, like a pendulum.

"Near the confluence of the rivers. It's not a huge structure, but maybe 20 levels."

"They… They are rebuilding the tower. They have a manual crane and are lifting a beam into place. There are hundreds of workers, and they are guarded by men with guns."

"Foolish. Foolish." Rho muttered.

As they watched, Rho on the regular telescope and JayJay on the larger bi-scope, the tower and the ruins of the city drifted away toward the west. Orange fire erupted around the base of the tower, followed by illuminated clouds of white smoke. The tower shifted, suddenly not plumb, and sank, heeling over as it fell, seemingly slower than natural. A column of black smoke rose into the sky and obscured their view. The young men stared speechlessly until the city dropped below the horizon, and only the top of the black column could be seen.

"You were not the only one to believe rebuilding the towers was foolish," JayJay said.

"All those people… The workers. They died."

Rho was always surprised by how life onboard the dirigible settled into an undramatic routine of long periods of seemingly motionless existence, the mottled cloudscape drifting by

below, and the darker, veiled ground moving below it, each at its independent speed. Jagged river drainages; rocky, snow and ice-covered mounts; blue or green bodies of water, forests, plains high and low, sometimes the smoke of lightning-caused fires. Sounds rising up. The farmer and his older two children were bored and offered to help on the watches, and they soon learned flying craft enough to make themselves useful. Rho made up a schedule, and only Parvati was unwilling to work. Angelus said the girl was not feeling well, and the only time anyone else saw her was when she ventured from her cabin to vomit over the side. The farmer parents, when they learned of the historical records stored on Rho's servers, spent considerable time teaching the children geography, weather science, oceanography, and geology, since the whole world around them was an active demonstration of the things themselves. At Rho's suggestion, the father endeavored to limit their wild playtime to a few hours prior to their evening meal. JayJay confided to Rho that Yemoja's treatments were going well, but the marriage should be postponed to the end of their voyage, to be on the safe side. Alamos was unusually restless and Yemoja was busy helping with the babies. Thus, the voyage around the globe proceeded as if it was the whole of life and nothing and no one existed apart from the members of the crew and family. The world below, though fascinating to examine through the telescopes and to contemplate under the perspective of its history, was remote enough to seem not fully real. Most of what they saw in every direction from height was the black of rock mountains and the white of ice and snow. Around that, north and south, blue water. Day and night, night and day until they at last neared the traditional winter encampment of Angelus and Alamos, which was as Angelus told them, on the northern banks of a river that flowed roughly west to east, and terminated not at the ocean, but at a narrow bay between the mainland and a sizeable island.

Rho pulled up a fairly specific set of maps and pinpointed the location, and figuring out exactly where the

dirigible was at every moment, knew three days out when they saw the several ice-covered volcanoes standing above the cloud cover, that they likely would not make landfall near the camp. Still, he and his crew would do their best. He played every trick he knew, climbing and descending to find local air that would push them in the right direction. They also faced the prospect, despite the maps and Rho's navigation skill, of a jagged coastline and, to them all, unfamiliar territory, especially when viewed from above.

The search required extreme diligence and attention, with someone awake and watching every moment, even at night. It was almost exactly the winter solstice and the shortest day of the year. Clouds often obscured the view, and Angelus was anxious that they could unknowingly pass right over the camp, unless it had blazing campfires.

"What happens if we miss it?" she asked Rho.

"The worst would be that we circle around the planet and try again."

"But I want to see my parents, it's been so many months, and I want my mother and sisters to be present at the birth of our child."

On the day Rho expected to find the camp, a translucent, grey, pearly white and silver cloud layer floated southwest to northeast, and Rho had successfully maneuvered over the ocean to approach the target island and the river mouth. He positioned the dirigible as high as he could but also below the clouds, which formed an undulated ceiling just overhead. Broken shreds of clouds surrounded them. Everyone, including the children, lined the railings to watch. Every pair of eyes was needed. They began passing over an island now of about the right size, shape, orientation, and topography. About midway across the island, one of the children spotted a great brown sow ursus with her two cubs. She was grazing contentedly but alert, her head rising to glance around, and the cubs wrestled nearby, sometimes standing on their hind legs and biting at each other. Rho could feel the humidity building

before the clouds thickened around them. Rain began. Accompanying low fogs began obscuring the ground just as the fuzzy cubs ran toward their mother. She had flopped to her back. They climbed onto her and started nursing while they all disappeared in the mist. Angelus handed out rain parkas.

"Okay," Rho called in his command voice. "We need to release some warm air now and drop as low as we can." Alamos and JayJay together pulled rope to open the valves in the air compartments of the envelope. Normally, only one person was needed for this job, but it was so critical now that there be no errors or delays.

Rho called out, "More, more, more… now stop!"

The turf-covered, treeless ground had jumped out of the fog at them and sped along only meters below the gondola. Rho fired the burners in short bursts until the ground was barely visible, and then there were over water again—the bay. Heartbeats raced. And then the rain stopped, the fog vanished, and the view opened up and spread wide around them.

"This is it. There is the winter camp site," Alamos said excitedly. He turned his head back and forth, and then as the dirigible crossed the front edge of the coastline, he ran to the rearward side of the dirigible. After a moment, he spoke, his voice flat, saying what everyone had already seen. "No one is here. It's empty."

"Set down. Right now. Land the craft." This was Yemoja, her voice knowing and passionate.

Rho guessed her intention—to be near the bay, which was wise—but also he had his own reasons for landing—to look for clues—and calling in a loud voice, he said, "Take us down. And prepare for anchoring."

They released the hot air until the four mooring ropes dragged along the ground to a likely place. Alamos, Rho, JayJay, and Yemoja each slid down a rope, and when Rho ran two loops around a tree snag, the others wobbling on unsteady legs, hammered anchors into the ground as the dirigible leaned away from the snag until they were able to cinch onto the anchor eyes. When Rho called, "set", Angelus and others

onboard cranked the hand winches until the gondola settled snug to the ground, the inflated gas envelope tugging on the rigging as it was lightly buffeted by the surface breezes. Rho and Alamos checked all the anchors and then walked about the barren camp.

The camp consisted of two concentric circles of low sod houses; one house stood at the center and had been assembled on a mound half again as high as all the rest. The houses had no doors in the walls, but a person entered through a hole in the roof. The camp, or village, was surrounded by a half dozen sawn board caches that had been built atop log poles, serving both for safe food storage and as a position for defending against attackers.

All of the houses were empty. The caches had been emptied. No one had been here during the past few months.

"Where are they?" Rho asked.

"They've established a new camp somewhere else, for some reason," Alamos said. "It could be for any reason, and while it's not where they told us they'd be, it's not unusual. But, they would have left a message someplace about their whereabouts, for us, or for others who may have ventured away and wish to rejoin our community. That's if anyone is alive; they might have been captured and eaten before they arrived here," he added somberly.

"Why did you say that?" Angelus, who had overheard this last bit from the gondola, asked with alarm.

"I don't know. Just a feeling."

Alamos began a thorough search strategy for a cairn or other attention-grabbing feature that might contain a message. Possibly a map or arrows carved into a tree. Meanwhile, the routine continued as normal on board, except that the children begged to be allowed to play and run around on the surface. At last, their mothers relented, regretting the dirtied clothing, since the dirigibles were kept spotlessly clean. Rho and Angelus talked quietly in the communal room away from noise and the chill breeze. After a wait, Alamos swung himself back over the side rail and entered the room to report.

"I found nothing," he said. "Nothing at all. A few broken shards of clay and some chunks of charcoal. A few pieces of bone."

"Bone?" Angelus asked. "What kind?"

"Hard to tell. They had been crushed by a stone tool."

"That doesn't seem right, does it?" Rho asked.

"No."

The three of them stepped outside to survey the bleak, narrow scene, far less expansive than what they had been seeing from above every day for months. On the ground in front of them, one of the smaller children was rolling an object, a clay jar, which seemed to be intact and sealed with a piece of greased hide and gut string. Alamos leaped over the handrail and took the jar, which set the child to screaming until its face turned bright red and it gasped for breath. All the adults and older children came running to find nothing particularly alarming. What they did see, however, was more important than they could expect: Alamos pulling back the skin seal from the jar, reaching in with his hand, and drawing out a tan sheet of dried, pressed woodpulp. He peered blankly at black markings on the sheet, then Angles took and gave it to Rho. As he scanned the sheet, his face expressed a mixture of wonder and humor. He said, finally, "This is writing and it's in Anglosi. It says, 'Welcome travelers!' and gives rough geographical coordinates of the new winter settlement. My best estimate without checking, is that it's about 20 kilometers further down the coastline, to the east. Who wrote this?"

"There was an old woman in our clan," Alamos said, "who told people she could turn words into marks and then make them into words again later. Like on your servers. She offered to teach the children how to do this, but some of the women said it was evil magic, and forbade it."

"I thought it a good skill to learn," Angelus said.

"I did too," Alamos agreed.

Angelus frowned at him as if to say *No you didn't*, but she let it go and said, "What shall we do?"

Rho walked to the edge of the camp to a heavy path

that parted the vegetation toward the beach. His whole plan from the beginning of their voyage was to join the people of Angelus and Alamos during their winter camp, and after visiting his family, return here and settle down into a ground-based life. He felt an urgency about making a decision—the vacant camp and the message in the jar made him feel uneasy—and he didn't believe he had time to discuss it all around with the others, and he also knew, or thought he knew, what each of them would say. The farmer and his wives would want to stay here and establish a long-term home. Rho had already seen Lyonnelle leave camp with a hoe, probably to survey the immediate area for cultivatable soil. JayJay, whom Rho had learned to trust as much as he trusted himself, and even more when it came to flying and human interaction on the surface, would wish to attempt to pedal-steer the inflated dirigible 20 kilometers down the coastline to the new camp. Rho had no doubt it could be done in time, provided the weather cooperated. The prevailing winds already moved in the right general direction, but not enough to fly to the coordinates. Unfortunate, because if the wind was perfect, it would take no more than an hour. Yemoja might want to build canoes and a water-raft to haul the dirigible and mostly deflated envelope to the new site. That wasn't a bad idea, and though ambitious and time-consuming, it would be much more certain to succeed than flying the dirigible. But it would also involve replacing the hydrogen later in unknown circumstances. Rho didn't care what Alamos thought in this situation. The boy would want to travel the traditional long paths inland, around the high icefields and deep fiords, but he would go along with whatever Angelus said, and besides, his thoughts obviously were now consumed with Yemoja. Probably, on his own, he'd be in favor not bothering now with finding his people, and of wandering the planet by air and sea for the rest of his life. But what would Angelus think? This he couldn't guess.

He turned from his concentrated thoughts, and there she was beside him. With all of the uncertainties, he was glad,

even quietly joyful, that, despite the wide gulf between what their individual lives had been, they always seemed to agree on what was most important, or if they didn't agree, almost without either of them noticing, they found a wider perspective that they both could fully support.

"What shall we do?" she asked again.

"I think we should set up a secure perimeter here, empty the dirigible of everything non-essential, so we can lift off fast with hydrogen alone in an emergency, and send Alamos and Yemoja off in her boat to see if your people are indeed at the coordinates. If she is willing, of course. These waters may be rougher than what she is accustomed to, though she has traveled much further on open water in a kayak with sail assistance. Lyonnelle and his people can look for and collect edible plant material and fish, with one of us to guard them. Then we wait to see before we decide what's next. We have options."

"That's what I was going to tell you," Angelus said, smiling. And with a sudden shudder, added, "It wouldn't be safe for us to travel overland."

"What's certain is that we can't live on the surface here with only these few people. We are not strong enough alone to protect and provide for ourselves."

"True. We could do one, but not both in the long term. Our people always need to be on guard for predatory bears and wolves, but those aren't the real danger."

"The animal-humans?"

"They are only what could force our clan to flee this good site for someplace safer, or less safe. I think you should send an e-m gun with Alamos, a handheld gun."

"No, we can't spare them here."

Angelus was silent for a few moments, listening. A deep rumble shook the air and ground around them. It could have been an earthquake, or less likely, an avalanche in the mountains to the north, or a crevasse opening up in the high ice fields to the east. It could have been a single rogue wave breaking on the shore, a small tsunami. Maybe even a meteor.

The rumble passed away as if it never happened. Then Angelus said, “At least send a small radio with him.”

Rho had been spooked by the rumble and said, “There’s something I didn’t say about the message in the jar.”

“What?”

“It said we’re in grave danger in this place.”

“Of course! That explains why they left. And if we’re in danger, then Alamos and Yemoja will be in danger, too.”

“Okay. I’ll send a gun, but only one. A rifle. And send a small radio, but its transmission range is limited.”

Late that night, when he and Angelus were alone in bed, after a long, thoughtful silence between them, he said, “I’ll teach you to read, if you like.”

“That’s wonderful…” she murmured, almost asleep.

Knik Glacier, Summer 2024

Thirteen

Animal-Humans

Though the ground winds had been favorable before they set out, as soon as they took to the water, the offshore breezes headed them. Alamos' arms, shoulders, and back ached more than he thought possible. His legs didn't feel so good, either, having been cramped in the small watercraft all day long. A short day, since they didn't dare paddle these rough waters during the long nights of the winter season

'I hurt, too," Yemoja said, her voice reflecting her decided weariness. "But it's no good to complain."

"I'm not complaining," Alamos said, defensively.

"Then what's all the moaning and grunting about?"

"I can't help it. It's my body speaking."

Indeed, the hard, everlasting, endless pull and reset, pull and reset of each paddling cycle had worn Alamos down so much that any thoughts of more than merely rolling up close to Yemoja in the night as they slept side by side on the ground under a tarp were met with fierce physical rebellion. As for her, she showed no interest in him at all, except for keeping warm. She turned her back to him, murmuring, "Wait for the wedding. But spoon up to me."

Rain fell in the night, and the wind changed. They ate breakfast quietly, packed up their bedding, and fitted themselves into ponchos. Yemoja walked to the shore, looked around, and noting the new and somewhat stiffer air movement, connected the outrigger and raised the mast. Once Alamos had climbed in, she unfurled the sail and pulled it into the optimal position to round the headlands before them. Effortlessly, they shot out over the water, the cold rain streaming down their faces and a gentle swell beneath them. For the first time, Alamos felt how much sailing over water and sailing through the air were similar.

Until Alamos spotted the narrow bay—the back of

which was where he thought the alternate winter settlement might be—the water was easy, but the ocean swells had become steeper and were building. Up ahead was a sand bar not far from the shore where the swells rose into breakers as the water became shallow. Alamos gripped the edges of the kayak with both hands as Yemoja said urgently, "Grab your paddle," and gathered up and tied the sail. "Keep the nose of the boat pointed straight toward shore and paddle hard." A swell rose up under them and lifted the back of the boat. If Alamos thought cutting through the water pushed by the wind was thrilling, being forcefully propelled by waves was terrifying. But it was also beautiful. "Okay, you can stop now," Yemoja shouted over the roar. He glanced to the side and up and caught a glimpse of a translucent green tunnel, the curling roof a foamy cream pouring in front of him. Yemoja was behind him, skillfully steering the boat down the side of the wave, which began losing power until it gently rode them up onto the gravelly beach and receded, leaving them on the land. "Jump out," she said as she herself jumped. He climbed out stiffly, and together they dragged the boat far above the reach of the highest wave that lapped at his heels.

After a few moments to catch their breath and for Alamos to vomit, they pulled the boat behind a log and into a thicket and placed broken boughs over the top to conceal it better. Alamos caught the scent of wood smoke and said, "I think we're at the right place." The sky had become noticeably darker, portending snow. They bundled up their gear. As they walked toward the source of smoke, Alamos smiled. "It's my people. They know we're here, but they don't yet know who we are."

"How do you know it's them?"

"The whistles and calls."

"Birds?"

"Not birds," he said with a quiet laugh.

In short order, Alamos spotted a trail and they followed this a while. Across a meadow, Alamos detected a hut just as the camp dogs spotted him and Yemoja. One

barked once, and the whole pack rushed at them with alarming speed. They halted suddenly a few yards away, bristling, until Alamos said, "What's wrong?"

The lead dog whimpered, and the pack rushed at them now with a totally different attitude. They bounded around him, turning in circles and wagging their tails, barking happily, and trying to lick his face and hands. He knelt down and rubbed the necks of those who would hold still long enough. He looked behind to Yemoja, who was shaking in fear, one wolf-like dog standing guard, his back's fur still risen straight up. "Shame on you," Alamos said, and aimed a kick at the dog, who easily jumped aside as Alamos knew he would. Alamos put his arms around Yemoja and said, "She's my friend." The wolf-dog approached humbly, tail and head down, and did his best to apologize.

Now that the dog drama had passed, Alamos looked up, and people were standing near, some of his young friends. They didn't smile, but came up and hugged him in turn and touched their foreheads to his. Yemoja would not allow this familiarity, but bowed to them each instead as they approached her, staring. As they all walked along in significant silence toward the encampment, it began to snow.

Alamos did not need anyone to tell him that the animal-humans were in the area and had been attacking. He had heard stories all his life about these creatures who seemed to have no souls and who ate human flesh, but his people's encounters with them were rare. The animal-humans, like the small black ursus, avoided confrontation and almost always fled rather than fought. Their method was never an all-out assault; they were too cunning or rather too shy and stupid for that, but they lay in wait and watched outside the functioning, defended, agricultural, or sanitary perimeters of the camp and rushed in with small packs to snatch women, children or even men who were alone or inattentive. They'd dispatch with rocks or unmodified sticks, then drag their dead victims away to the nearest thicket and tear them into pieces and sometimes devour them while still warm. They would even kill and eat

puppies and dogs if possible, not keeping any animals for their own, which for Alamos, was unthinkable, for it showed how degraded they had become, having lost the ability to communicate and interact with other social beings with whom they might have common interests and a natural affinity.

Alamos's father, Manteco, emerged from his tent, pulled up his hood against the snow, touched his son's forehead with his and gave him a long hug. He stood back with tears in his eyes and gazed at Yemoja, and then also gave her the traditional greeting as Alamos spoke her name and said, "We wish to marry, today, if you will permit us." Yemoja might be rude to people who didn't matter to her, but she dared not refuse the greeting from the father of her soon-to-be husband.

Manteco again gazed at Yemoja with sorrow mixed with wonder in his face, and said, "She is not of our race, but more like those who crossed the ancient land bridges long before civilization. I certainly will not object to that, no more than I did to Rho after he proved himself. Someone—one of the sentries—watched her handle your boat in the surf and told me. Impressive. We may have a wedding, but I'm afraid we can't celebrate. Not yet. His father's voice quavered and faded as he said those words, and then he said in a different voice. "Your mother… My Modesta. Your mother has been taken. The animal-humans."

Alamos had almost no time even for his immediate reaction to the murder of his mother, let alone for sustained grief. Of course, there was shock and the horror and anger about the finality and irrevocability of her death. There was no way to undo this. No way to fix it. The animal-humans had grabbed her this very morning as she collected inner bark fibers for fire starting and string near a wooded area just north of camp. Alamos felt certain that if he had been here, things would have been different. That somehow, his presence would have

changed when she left the safety of the center of camp, or of the confidence of the animal-humans. Or even he might have gone with her to help. But he had no time for much speculation. The relative safety of a short winter day was already slipping away, and the people bustled about taking care of their business while they could. Alamos and Yemoja had been given a tent and new bedding for their first night as husband and wife. The tent would be provisioned with kvass to drink and caribou meatballs to eat. Yemoja disappeared among the women for whatever beautification rites and bathing she would submit to, and Alamos was given a basket of stone points to attach to spear shafts. He inspected the points. They were far from perfect, having been made in haste. They were sharp, but not as aerodynamic as he would wish for hunting, let alone defense. He went to work, but suspected that any real battle would be fought with knives and clubs. He wished that Rho had lent him an additional e-m gun, one for Yemoja. The shadow and burden of the loss of his mother darkened his mind and sapped his energy, but the time passed quickly until his father came and told him, "We're ready for the ceremony."

As they walked together, his father stopped suddenly and turned to his son. "She's beautiful," he said. Not of a womanly beauty I ever imagined, but my imagination has grown larger since my son-in-law arrived from the sky. How are they, he and my Angelus?"

"Angelus is with child."

His father said nothing to this. He only smiled at what was good, but entirely expected and ordinary. And the tall thin boy?"

"Rho is like an angel, but I never knew what angels were like until I met him. He possesses the skills of all the creatures of the world. And he's teaching me. I have soared in the sky around the entire planet!"

Manteco sighed. "I imagine your mother alive."

His father had built an open fire in the common area, and

people gathered around in the falling snow and growing darkness. Alamos noticed that all of his friends—young men—were absent, presumably on guard duty in their blinds and wearing ponchos. His father and the oldest man of the tribe stood together before the tent. Yemoja approached with a girl of the clan on each side of her, one of the girls being Alamos's cousin. Yemoja was now adorned in the festival garb of his own people, with a bib necklace of tiny blue and red stones. She was wearing a wreath of glossy, dried leaves in her broided hair. Her eyes looked bigger and more alluring than he had ever noticed before. He took her by the hand and caught a minty, floral scent. They stood side by side before the elder men.

The older man spoke first: "Though our community is in mortal danger this evening, we must also spare a few moments for living. And thus we must speak of Modesta, our mother and sister, who passed into another life today. Notice the lovely brown leaves in the bride's hair. They were, I've been told, collected when green long ago. They are dead, but they live on in another form than before. They are beautiful and will maintain their beauty for years to come if they are preserved and protected. The essence of the leaves lives on, even when they are crumbled and mixed with the earth. So is the life of Modesta. She is dead, but her essence, and not only her physical essence, but that of her spirit too, will live on. For now, in sorrow, but later with soft fondness and good humor, we preserve and protect her memory, but even when those memories crumble and those who follow pass away from the life we know, her identity, her unique and personal self, will never be destroyed."

Now Alamos's father spoke: "Thank you, dear elder. Alamos and Yemoja, do you declare your intention before our community to live beginning now as husband and wife, with the hope that children will ensue?"

Alamos and Yemoja answered in harmony, "Yes."

"Do either of you know any reason why you may not be joined?"

Alamos said "No," but Yemoja remained silent. He gently tapped her foot with his and she said, "No," demurely.

"Then," the elder said, "Let it be so. Honor your fathers and your mothers." And all the men and older women present nodded while all the girls blurted or emitted some sort of squeal or laugh. The celebration ended, and as Alamos led Yemoja into the lamp-lit tent and tied down the door flap, everyone else moved away to their assigned tasks.

Alamos woke and did not know what time it was. All his life up until two months ago he had lived on a diurnal schedule and slept at night and was awake during daylight, but even this brief time traveling around the planet had somewhat disturbed his internal clock, so that when planted on a fixed location on the surface for any length of time he found himself napping in the day and alert for an hour or so at night. None of this occupied his thinking at the moment because he was remembering warmly the past hours, or however long it had been since the wedding ceremony. Warmly, partly because Yemoja next to him was warm despite the frigid air inside the tent. He stirred himself to snuggle closer, and she spoke.

"You're awake, love?"

"Awake, but rested. I won't be able to sleep for a while."

"I've been hearing voices outside. Calls. It was dead quiet, but now it's not."

The snowfall was dry, and the air still, which was much better by far than either heavy wet snow or dry wind-driven, drifting snow. Snow of any sort muffled sound, but Alamos heard anxiety and alarm outside in every direction.

"I'm going out. I need to help guard our camp." Yemoja said nothing to this need, but only, "Come back as soon as you can."

Alamos put on all his clothes and his boots, with the poncho over all, and took his knife and bow, and the e-m rifle, which he slung across his back. He trudged inland about 100 meters, following a track of footfalls until he reached two of

the men. Startled, they flung out their arms toward him when he came up behind, and then when they saw him, they breathed sighs of relief, their breaths making small clouds.

"There's a band of animal-humans prowling around our perimeter," one of them said, "I saw a whole lot of trampled snow, just over there, and I came right back." He was pointing down toward a shallow draw that contained a creek. "Everyone is awake and on guard."

"We let you sleep," the other said. Though his face was mostly hidden by his fur-lined hood, Alamos heard the grin in his voice.

Just then, frantic barks of the dogs and warning, angry shouts of people broke out everywhere at once, it seemed. A dark, bundled figure—no, three figures—rushed up to the group and knocked the grinning young man to the ground with a killing blow. Alamos had whipped out his knife and slashed at another assailant and then lunged at him with the knife point. The creature bellowed and fell, thrashing in the snow that was now taking on a pink stain. Two of the animal-humans were now wrestling with his other friend, Sandego. Alamos stabbed one monster and then the other, and seeing instantly that they didn't go down, he stabbed each again and again. But he was too late; one of the animal-humans had bitten through the throat of his friend. Alamos looked at the scene with horror. Blood was soaking into the snow all around him.

One of the animal creatures was attempting to crawl away. When Alamos approached, it rolled over and snarled viciously, fiercely, pretending to have more fight in it, but Alamos was not fooled and quickly stepped up and blasted it with a brief pulse of the e-m rifle. Whatever battle that was still in progress was not near him. Another sudden bright, humming flash lit up the trees and the falling snow. He sprinted back to his tent, aware of the shadows of animal-humans busy all around him, no longer fighting, but either feasting, dragging away the dead bodies of his people, or standing frozen, astonished by what they saw: Yemoja in front

of their tent, fully dressed, backpacks at her feet, and with an e-m pistol in hand. A pile of animal-humans lay before her.

"Let me have that," he said, and she gave him the gun.

He checked, and the battery had no more shots left. Yemoja handed him a heavy pouch. "Two more batteries," she said. The animal-humans were not moving closer yet. They still were afraid of the bright flash and were puzzled about what had killed their fellows. Alamos, holding the rifle at the ready with one hand, put on his backpack with Yemoja's help, and then helped her put on her pack.

"Let's walk slowly away."

As they moved, Alamos changed the battery of her hand gun and gave it back. The animal-humans followed them and their numbers grew. Greed, anger, and curiosity moved them, certainly, Alamos thought. And as the creatures no longer saw the pile of their dead, their fear diminished. The crowd, now a thick circle around them, became larger. Alamos called out, taunting them. "Come on, let's go. Eat us. We taste good." He thought of his most horrible insults, but nothing he could say to them would be worse than they actually were.

"When I say 'kneel,' go down into the snow, "he said to Yemoja. "And when I say 'okay,' run fast with me."

By now, a circle had grown to a couple dozen or more, snarling and fetid, some of the more hairy ones barely clothed, not by any means all of the attackers, but a sizeable number. Alamos despaired of any human survivors, and if Yemoja hadn't stolen an e-m gun, she and he probably too, would have succumbed to the slaughter. He had never heard before of animal-humans raiding so boldly and with large numbers. No wonder his people had been unprepared. Even now, Yemoja and his chances of living through this seemed slim. But there were so many of the creatures around him now, and this had given him an idea.

"Now! Kneel!" he said and Yemoja dropped down. Alamos lit the e-m rifle and swept the beam in a circle, a full circle. Cries and screams drowned out the hum, and the

animal-humans collapsed, some cut clean in two, others mortally wounded. The beam grew weaker in the last seconds of extended firing. The weapon was never intended for such a use, but it lasted until he reached where he had begun and he yelled, "Okay run!"

They ran. And ran. And ran toward the sea and the kayak. After a short time, they stopped and listened. They could still hear the screams. But after a while the screams stopped and it became silent. No sounds but crisp snow flakes dropping around them and the rasping of dried foliage. They hugged each other and waited still longer until a faint light grew on the south horizon. Their tracks behind them filled with snow and disappeared. Nothing was following them.

They found a sheltered spot nearby within sight of water and made a simple canopy of an extra poncho to keep off the snow while they ate and drank a little, always on alert for pursuit. The winter day grew, though the sun never broke through the snow clouds. Rested, they packed up the poncho and continued until reaching the bay where they had hidden Yemoja's kayak. The steady snow had stopped falling and the air seemed to change. Fog rolled in from the ocean, moving easterly, so at least their scent would not carry back toward the camp. When they reached the hiding place, the branches they had placed over the boat had been thrown to the side. The kayak was there, where they left it, but someone, or something, had broken holes in the bottom and smashed it up with rocks. And the paddles were gone.

After a few moments of stunned silence, Yemoja suddenly fell into a hysterical panic. She dashed around the area searching blindly and saying over and over, "We must find the paddles. I sawed and carved those myself. I can't lose my paddles." Alamos watched her in alarm. He had never seen her lose control before, but in this instant, he realized he had to be strong and do what he could to calm and reassure her. It wasn't just the paddles, it was the loss of the boat and the ability to escape, and the danger and horror of the hours before. He approached and grabbed her hand. She

stopped, and he drew her into a soft, but firm embrace. She broke down then and sobbed. This lasted for several minutes until, at last, she was quiet and pulled away from him.

"Let's look around systematically and see what we can find," he said and pointed northeast. "I've noticed that there are pieces of the kayak on the ground in that direction. "Let's see what we can find." Sure enough, in a few minutes, they found one paddle and further on, another. The latter had human-like teeth marks in the blade. It was as if the animal-humans had sensed their value and maybe their beauty, and carted them off a short distance before coming to their senses that they were useless to them, as they were so stupid as to not even have a use for the most basic tools.

The paddles were too long to lash to their packs, so they had to be carried in hand. The couple stealthily made their way through the deep snow back to the camp. They heard no noise or saw any signs that any animal-humans had remained behind. Snow had covered everything, and the site seemed pure and softly innocent, but Alamos knew that some of the humps here and there were parts of bodies—of his people or of the animal-humans, he wasn't sure which, and didn't want to know. It was enough to know they were dead and there was nothing he needed or could do about it, either by way of dispatching an enemy or burying a friend. There were no signs of life left of any kind. Except…

A bark came from under a collapsed shelter. A long snout emerged, and then a furry beast, and then another. Five dogs and one big puppy had survived somehow, perhaps had run away to safety, or attempted to protect the humans, and returned to take shelter in the damaged tent. The dogs all came up to express their loyalty and submission to the familiar humans, but then they backed away, whining in worry.

"So many dogs," Alamos said. "I'm glad they survived, but how will we feed them?"

"Maybe they should feed us," Yemoja said.

"I was thinking of that, but the animal-humans have already killed or driven away all the game."

"I mean, we could eat them."

"No. Oh, of course, that's true. Our people have had to do that before. But it's always a last resort. Eating dogs who help keep you alive is eating yourself."

The dogs determined that the humans didn't seem to have any plan, and so one or two of the more timid ones crawled back under the shelter. The others looked around as if they were thinking of attempting a hunt. One of them dug in the snow looking for a meal. Alamos came up behind it and tapped it with a paddle to make it stop.

While Yemoja knelt down and vigorously rubbed the shoulders of that dog, Alamos started walking around the camp, checking for resources. He pulled out a broken-up dog sled. "I think I can fix this, if you let me use the paddles."

"What is it?" she said.

"It's like a canoe, or kayak for snow and ice."

"And the dogs pull it? Yes, use the paddles. I'll probably never have another boat."

"Don't be so sure. I think we can use pieces of your kayak to repair the sled, too. Hey, you look around for dog harnesses, and I'll go salvage what I can. Leather straps sewn together. We have to hurry, because I won't be able to stop the dogs from eating the dead for long."

"Why not let them eat the animal-human dead?"

"You know, they once were human, but they gave up their humanity long ago and became lower than animals. Rho told me the whole story, or the myth. They began as replicas that had no soul."

"Okay, okay. Human replicas. Don't tell me now. When I look for the harnesses, I will also find…"

"Don't tell me what you find. How will you know which ones they are?"

"Once you've seen the monsters, it's impossible not to know which is which. I'll… I will be respectful of your people's remains."

While Yemoja engaged in her grisly foraging, Alamos walked all around the camp, hoping to find any human survivors, or tracks of survivors. He took his time; he didn't dare to return early because Yemoja might not be done. He pushed away the horrible possibility that everyone was dead, but it always crept back into his mind, and he pushed it away again. It always returned until he gave up all resistance and sank into a deep despondency. His mother and now his father were dead. All his cousins. His friends. The woman who could write and read. It was a nightmare more than he could bear.

He found he hadn't been moving, but simply staring across a snowy plain. Cold had settled into his feet and chilled the backs of his arms. How long had he been standing there? The winter day was already drawing to a close. It was time to return to Yemoja. When he arrived, the dogs were lying around comfortably in the snow and licking their muzzles, and even rolling for pleasure. They were full. Yemoja had collected wood and built a fire at the edge of the camp. She also had found extra blankets and food for her and Rho—some cooked, mashed tubers that had frozen solid and a bag of tarandus jerky that they could eat. Together they lashed together a sled, dragged it around to see how well it worked, then set up a shelter. Exhausted, they snuggled into their sleeping bags, fully clothed. The dogs crept into the shelter and curled up around them. It would be a warm, safe night.

"It's time for us to leave."

Alamos said this several times while gently shaking Yemoja. The dogs all got up, stretched, and went off to pee and eat. Yemoja eventually squirmed out of her bag. When the dogs returned, Alamos called them all to him and watched. The dogs sensed that they were about to go on a journey and most of them were excited. They jumped around and barked in their enthusiasm. Others tried to lick his hands. Alamos

studied them carefully. He didn't know most of them well, as he had been gone for months, and some of these had been pups when he left. One of the dogs he did know—an older one who sat still and watched. Its name was Black, obviously because of his color. He looked like a dark, shaggy, long-legged wolf with big feet. When Alamos looked him in the eye, he did not blink and look away. Alamos knelt, and Black submitted to having his feet, muscles, and fat condition checked. His coat was shiny and healthy. An old dog, but fit and calm. A smart dog. Black would be the team leader. While Yemoja watched, Alamos checked the other dogs and made mental notes. This one should have boots for her feet. This one would pull just behind Black because of her energy and strength. This one would not be harnessed because he was too small and young. Only five to pull and not enough for a team, but they had to make do. It did not take long to load their sled and get the dogs hitched together. Yemoja stepped onto the back of the sled, Alamos said, "Go," and the dogs were off. Alamos ran behind and pushed, then jumped on.

Alamos knew there were only two possible routes left for them back to the dirigible and his people, his only people now. He thought through this out loud as they skimmed west across the snow toward the deciding point where the possible routes would split. Yemoja listened without comment. Her life had been on the water in lower, warmer latitudes, and she had nothing to offer.

The routes: Around the mountain range, which might take a week or more, or over the mountains and across the mammoth ice field.

The dogs would have an easier time going around because it was fairly level, but they all would run out of food. Added to the risk were animal-humans who might be out there. The ice field could take three days, much shorter, but it would be impossible for the dogs to climb up to it while pulling the sled. Alamos and Yemoja could not walk across the ice field alone. Once they reached the ice field—apart from crevasses, which would be covered and hidden by snow

and fatal if undetected, or filled up and safe to cross—the dogs would do well. The animal-humans would never be up there that high this time of year and would not follow them.

In the end, the sounder choice was to try to cross over. And if the dogs couldn't climb even with Alamos and Yemoja walking, the group would have to return to the fork and try to go around. But after so much time wasted, their chances of making it so far were even more slender.

As it turned out, mushing near a glacial tongue and finding a wide trail that animals used to traverse some steep rocky terrain, they easily reached a ridge that descended back toward the ice field, though it took a toll on their strength. Before them lay the broad, limitless, formidable ice desert. Alamos and Yemoja squinted out across the blindingly bright whiteness—no greenery or shadows for the eyes to rest upon. They could just make out an ice mountain on the horizon. Here they made their first camp. It would be better to sleep now and, to prevent eye damage, travel across in the dark.

Once the seagoing kayak was gone, their return journey had been hopeless from the beginning, but they needed to try. If they made it across the ice field, there would be the descent, and no telling what impossible, steep, rocky terrain they'd find on the other side, and even if they made it down, could they find their way to the dirigible and people? The drama was minimal because they only mushed and rested for short periods.

And they could not make it across the ice field. The food ran out and the dogs exhausted themselves. They all were dehydrated—they couldn't eat snow fast enough. One of the younger dogs died. More than one's feet were raw and bloody. Rho listened for pings on the handheld radio, hoping at least to hear a friendly voice. At last, after a long, exhausting night and toward the end of the second day on the ice, when the dogs crept along, Alamos decided to stop and rest, this time setting up a shelter. He looked ahead to the ice flats and humps before him, the breeze brushing his face. Yemoja barely spoke; she could only respond to Alamos's

questions with a weak, trusting smile. They settled in to sleep and peacefully submit to the inevitable. Alamos was buried in his sleeping bag with Yemoja snoring beside him. He was warm—or was it numbness?—and calmly contemplating the unknown and welcoming, almost delicious void that was death. *How will it be for me to no longer be part of the world? To join the millions of humans—most of everyone who ever was born—in this endless, dreamless sleep, that as far as he knew for certain, would never have a wakening?* As he felt his conscious thought fading, a feeling came to him that humans were not natural, but supernatural, and what was above nature never succumbed to death…

He woke and Yemoja woke with him, it seemed. They were still alive, cold but alive. There was no mistake, because if they were dead, they'd not feel the cold. Yemoja fumbled in her gear bag, pulled out the radio once more, and handed it to Alamos, who said, "I should have tried it again earlier." He turned on the radio and let it scan the frequencies. There were no pings whatever. Nobody within range. Yemoja fell back into unconsciousness, maybe for the last time. Alamos listened to the quiet, lonesome static until he, too, without being aware of it, fell asleep.

But then he was aware again. A roaring, gurgling, hissing noise that could not be the wind. Voices calling—frantic human voices. He was being bundled and lifted. Then he was in a hot space, the air so hot it was painful and made him feel sick.

Sleep again took him, until he woke up enough to find himself inside the cabin of a dirigible, swaddled in down comforters and drenched in sweat. He threw the comforter off his upper body and sat up on one elbow—on an arm that hurt because of an IV inserted into its vein. Across the room lay Yemoja, covered with comforters and breathing deeply. Three dogs lay next to her on the floor, and they lifted their heads and whined. The cabin swayed, and Alamos felt a sudden increase in weight from a rise in altitude.

They were airborne.

Fourteen

Rescue

A few days earlier, Rho had watched Alamos and Yemoja paddle around the headland to the east and wondered if he'd ever see them again. For most of his life, which was always subject to the elements, partings always held the possibility of permanence. Throughout his people's history, as skilled as they had become, the loss of a family dirigible or even of an entire flight group due to unexpected violence of weather, the breakdown of equipment, or of being marooned was never out of the ordinary. He turned away and did not give it any more thought. After hundreds of years of genetic refinement, his easy resignation to what might be inevitable was beyond his self-awareness. Angelus, however, worried out loud and continuously. Rejoining her people quickly had always been essential for their family survival.

"At most, it will take them five days to float there and back," Rho said. "We don't need to speak of it again until then."

Angelus, however, did speak of it, again and again, every day and two or three times a day. She worried to Rho about a boat mishap, she worried to JayJay about an ursus attack, she worried to the farmer that her people were not at the alternate camp and Alamos might never find them and Rho's whole group never join up with them, but most of all she worried to everyone that her brother and Yemoja would be caught and murdered by the animal-humans, or that they themselves would be attacked. Her anxiety, heightened by her sharing the horror stories she had heard since childhood, infected everyone, and Rho decided he must do something.

So, even though there were no signs at all of their presence in the vicinity, he maintained a sun-cycle watch schedule and trained everyone in the use of the hand-held e-m guns, entrusting the few of the rifles in good repair to those who showed the most aptitude. It was during this process that

he discovered one of the guns was missing. At first, he was upset because it was obvious that Alamos had taken it without permission, or more likely, Yemoja. And then he smiled grimly, and thought, "Well, I'm not infallible and my order may have been wrong, I'm glad they're armed up."

During these days of waiting, waiting because there really was nothing else to do but wait—and waiting is always hard—strains emerged between JayJay and the farmer, whose wives, his sisters, began to argue with him and each other. And if the children weren't fighting among themselves, they were crying, or worse, wandering away from the camp.

Rho asked Angelus to try to manage the conflicts—to keep her busy—so he himself could dig through the stored history archives to learn everything possible about the animal-humans. Knowing about them would help him hunt them.

During his younger years, he had only heard about their grotesque appearance, their brutality and stupidity, and how important it was to stay safe, and preferably away from them when he was on the surface. One of the foundational ethos of his people was keeping separate from them, and for most of the castes, from any contact with the surface. Then, as he approached manhood, when he experienced his first view of a female of the surface—Angelus—he was shocked at her beauty, and for him, her allurement. He came to believe then, that his people's beliefs were untrue and he came to marry Angelus and was producing children with her. But now he was realizing that the horror tales likely were true and the beliefs partly based on reality. It was only that the beliefs were incomplete. For him then, another missing part was how the animal-humans came to be in the first place, and the archives were full of documents, reports, and sometimes pure speculation on how this happened.

He spent considerable time absorbing written material and watching ancient videos while making notes.

He was surprised to find so much information. On one side of the scale were sensational scare-mongering and contemptuous arrogance expressed in the popular sensorial

media and print publications. On the other side, intricate, balanced, but often biased surveys of inscrutable studies in scholarly journals. Rho sought out material to read matching his own view of the universe, that nature knew best, and that human invention, while helpful, always fails in the end.

One evening, he called everyone together in the center of the camp, where a few rudimentary benches had been set up and tarps hung to provide a wind shield. A fire blazed in the middle. Everyone came bundled up against the cold, everyone came but JayJay, pulling a stressful solo guard duty, and Parvati who watched the younger children in the dirigible's cabins. Lafayette, the usual presumed babysitter, was happy to be included among the adults. Everyone seemed physically comfortable, but Rho could see their unease. Word had gotten around that it was not to be a pleasant subject. Or much worse, boring.

"Among our people of the air, we have a tribe of storytellers. They study the history of humanity, and from it they compose tales and songs to help us understand what has happened in the past, and how we came to live as we do. Our stories tell of how a thousand years ago and longer, the seas rose and covered much of the land that people had lived on.

"Wars broke out everywhere. Long before what they called civilization collapsed, our ancestors invented our air vessels and equipped them for us to survive independent of the land, or mostly independent, because another clan of our people still maintained contact with the surface to collect minerals, certain kinds of food and materials, and early-on, the additional technology we needed. That clan, or tribe were hunter-gatherers, and I'm descended from them. From what we observed on the surface, and what others saw from the sky, the humans below had over time, lost their humanity; they became even less than the animals. Because of their incomprehensible living conditions, and the destruction of conscience and a philosophy detached from reality, they had developed into an evolutionary dead branch.

"We stopped paying attention and cut ourselves off

from any attempts to communicate with what had been our own kind. What we didn't expect was that pockets of humanity still remained on the surface, people hidden from the destructive forces, and who through pain and difficulties, survived and made a way of life, one similar to what existed for perhaps 12,000 years before. Angelus, Alamos, and all of you in some way are the legacy of those people.

"What we in the sky never knew, or ignored and eventually lost track of, was exactly how humans on the surface lost their humanity. Or how complex the loss was. Our theory and belief is sound—that it was voluntarily relinquished by the population on the surface, or it was a consequence of their way of life. But your existence argues for a modification to this idea. Because I was looking for other reasons, and not only assuming that we were totally correct, I've found a new idea, one that many scientists knew when it was occurring, but who were afraid to speak out about, because it contradicted the conventional perspective.

"This information is scattered throughout the records, but in no place is its significance recognized.

"Scientists—people who studied how the world worked—scientists in the day experimented with taking cells from the body and using those cells to grow organs and eventually whole new individuals. They began with single cell beings, then moved to animals, and finally to humans. Clones, they called them. The problem is that the genetic replicas didn't possess the supernatural element that makes humans, human. I don't mean they weren't genetically humans, because the replicas appeared no different than humans reproduced biologically. But I mean that the replicas didn't contain characteristics like conscience, empathy, imagination, creativity. And they had limited ability to understand and use symbolic language. They were highly intelligent in the basic mental functions, and if anything, had greater sensory powers, and because of intentional genetic selection, they might have been faster and stronger. So, my idea is that when the replicas were first created, they bred

rapidly, cross-bred with naturally produced humans, and when things broke down everywhere, they collected into gangs.

They nearly destroyed the remnants of the true human population on the surface. But they seldom produced or grew anything but themselves. The animal-humans who are now still alive number only a fraction of what existed before. But, they still are powerful and as destructive as ever.

"This is my idea, and it might be wrong, or half-wrong, but for now it really doesn't matter one way or another.

"These are the creatures that have been stalking the people of Angelus and Alamos. This is why those people left their winter camp here. We've not heard from Alamos and Yemoja for five days, which is the most time they would need to return, if nothing bad happened. We need to prepare to depart with a minute's notice in case we're attacked, or if we hear news from Alamos and Yemoja. The surface wind is changing, and I believe we may be able to fly near the new winter camp, if we must."

No one seemed to have any questions. Some of them hadn't even been listening. Rho's analytical thinking was not important to any of them. What was important was getting ready to fly, and soon after he stopped talking, everyone including the children—forgetting their quarrels—moved into action that was far more efficient and coordinated than how they'd performed before, or if he had been stomping around shouting orders.

As if it had been timed to the group's readiness, late that evening, well after nightfall, JayJay rushed into Rho's cabin shouting, "Their radio is on, their radio is on!" Rho's eyes opened and he was on his feet before his mind was fully awake. He stood there blinking and staring into JayJay's lighted face.

"Their radio is on," JayJay said. "It's sending a signal, and I have them located."

"Where?" Rho said, finally.

"On top of the ice field."

Rho sped out around the deck and into the radio room,

JayJay on his heels. He stared at the pulsing light on the server screen map. “Send up a navigation balloon.”

JayJay stepped outside, paused for a few instants, and shouted, “Done.”

By then, everyone in the camp was awake and rushing around, packing and loading the last little bits of stuff not yet on board. Many of the children were already stowed away in cabins. Some people stood by the ground moorings, ready to launch, as they had drilled the day before.

Rho studied the readings. “The air 100 meters up is perfect. 200 meters.” He waited, “Okay, 1000 meters, good. “Let’s go! Now!”

The four available hands at the moorings ratcheted the stakes out, the burners kicked on, the stone and sand bags dropped, and the dirigible sprang into the air, pulling one stuck mooring loose too late, causing the dirigible to lurch to one side and then rebound to the other. The one adult and all the children inside who weren’t holding something secure tumbled back and forth. The unmooring hands, Lyonnelle, Angelus, Kay, and Lafayette, trembling with fear or excitement, stood on their spikes and hung on, suspended over the ground that rapidly dropped away. A couple climbed their ropes, and the others shouted to be pulled up.

The sun was just cracking the edge of the horizon and rose quicker than what was natural from a ground dweller’s perspective as the dirigible shot up. The surface opened up all around, and Rho smiled. All the feelings of freedom, comfort, confidence, and security that he had known in an always-uncertain, changing, transitory, and dangerous environment came back to him again. This was living! The winds were perfect, as long as they didn’t fly too high and fast. As the craft rose, he kept it near the treetops, but not too near, and then rose up beside jagged rock and ice falls. The tongue of a glacier flowed downward to the south. At last, the body of the icefield came into view. JayJay was inside the radio room shouting the news every minute. The centered blip of the dirigible approached the blip of the radio. Minute after

minute. Rho noticed every tiny detail of what was happening. Every creak and squeak of the aircraft and rigging. The muffled flushing of a toilet head back in its compartment. He began counting every one of his breaths to make sure he was breathing.

"We're going to miss them," JayJay shouted. "We are missing them! We are going to pass!" He fell silent.

Rho had been tuned in to JayJay's observations, but he had just spotted the shelter, bivouac, or whatever contraption or conveyance Alamos had put together to travel over the icefield, because one of the farmer children had pulled on his shirt and said, "Excuse me."

Rho had looked down to see where the child had pointed and said as a response to JayJay's alarm, "That's it. Thank you! OK, let's descend."

He didn't need to shout or repeat the command. JayJay heard him and released warm air from the top of the envelope, and the dirigible dropped like a rock. Rho calmly gauged their rate of descent and himself shut the valve. The descent slowed and grew slower, but not slow enough, and he shouted, "Hold on!" seconds before the gondola assembly hit the ice hard and dragged along. The mooring hands—and at the last moment, Rho—jumped, fell, or slid overboard, and with JayJay releasing the remaining warm air, they dragged axes held in hand, seemingly forever and ever, until the craft came to a full stop.

The jumble of frost-covered human artifacts that was giving off the signal and housed Alamos and Yemoja was less than 100 meters away.

"How are our supplies? What's our hydrogen pressure? How are we set?"

Rho had gotten up from his server, yawned, and slowly paced the whole perimeter of the suspended, airborne gondola,

noticing the dirigible more or less drifting without a purpose or direction, and found JayJay in the storage room staring at an empty refrigeration unit in the corner. "How are we set?" Rho repeated.

JayJay wheeled around saying, "Supplies, hydrogen, right. Well, as you see, we are out of green stuff, and have been for a while. We have mineral and concentrated vitamin supplements. We are short on carbohydrates, but we should be fine. Ummm, last I checked, which was 3 hours ago, we were 82% of optimal on hydrogen. Water is fine, so in a day or two of hydrolysis, we will approach, you know, optimal. And with that, we also bring up our oxygen."

"Do we have all we need for circumnavigation?

"You mean for, what, a month?"

Maybe twice that. Before killing… well, before our encounter with the animal-humans, I've always had in mind staying as far from the surface as possible except to collect resources, but I think it's better if we do a low altitude circuit."

"Why?" JayJay said sharply. "I mean, why?" he repeated in a less challenging tone.

Rho sighed. "I'd like to do a survey, an aerial survey. I know that at low altitude our field of view is narrow, but we can observe more detail. After all our experiences, I'd like to get a better sense of the state of the world. Draw some cultural and ground climate maps. My people have not been paying attention for a long time, and they have lost touch. They have little idea of what's happening below them. Even I have only seen a little. They need to know."

"Do you mean…? What exactly do you mean?"

"I'd like to join up with the Annuary gathering."

"No, no. You can't. They would throw me overboard. They hate pirates."

"You aren't an algolim. Most of your people aren't angolim. They don't know that, but we can show them."

"What about all these other people in your sky clans? These 'disgusting land animals.' I know what they say. I've

listened to the radio transmissions. I've heard plenty of their stories."

"You don't understand how desperate my people are about their future. When we show up, they will be amazed. Amazed enough not to react. They will question. We'll show them."

"I don't think so."

"Hey, listen to me. Your prejudices are as strong as theirs. You've been observing me for a long time, and you know I'm not like that."

"I'm not so sure. How about how we massacred all those animal-humans?"

"Mmmm. That's totally different. They're pure evil."

JayJay softened. "Yeah, I know. It's different. I'm not confident your people will see the difference."

"They'll see you, and the rest of us, and realize we'll help them thrive and prosper. Anyway, we're too late for this year's gathering. It's almost over. It'll have to be next year. And we'll have babies to show them by then. Don't worry."

JayJay moaned and said, "There's one more issue."

"The Canis lupus. Wolves. Throw them overboard, or butcher and dry them. We don't keep live cattle onboard.

"You'd have a mutiny on your hands."

Rho paused for some time, thinking.

"You'd have a mutiny," JayJay repeated.

"I suppose you're right. Let's bring up the subject of the creatures for discussion. I know exactly how it will go," Rho continued to JayJay, but more to himself. "I see the wisdom of keeping them. I just don't know yet how they'll fit in. But, after all, my brother kept falcons for hunting, and the adolescent girl, your niece, has a jungle fowl."

"Fay. She's hardly a girl anymore. She keeps several egg-laying fowls—chickens. And one of my nephews harbors a pet turtle."

"Oh, no," Rho said, shaking his head. "What's a turtle? What's its Latin name?"

"Don't know. A reptile that travels in its shelter, like

we do. I've heard turtles make a delicately flavored soup."

Thus began the long homeward journey, home as Rho defined it. Not a fixed place on the surface with fixed earth under his feet and trees or plants growing all around. Not a place with rocks and ice and flowing water, and teeming creatures from the countless insects, spiders, reptiles, and birds, to the marmota and gulo, to the giant brown ursus and the ovibox. But homeward to a sequence of continuous, perceptible movement and change. Impermanence. Of ever drifting or driving clouds above and below, forming, vanishing, and reforming, painting the sky in ever beautiful, dramatic colors. The brilliant, crystal-clear stars wheeling above at night. Of brown and green below, or white and grey—the surface concealed for days, almost forgotten. And also community, with a bond between people who seldom even saw each other except for the once-a-year gathering; and even then, between certain people whom he cherished dearly who somehow could not, because of natural forces, reach the coordinates. A calm, almost dispassionate people, whose temperament was, at its heart, resignation and acceptance of the transience of the world around them. A people who had mastered skills of navigation and design, and technical hand-crafting, and the reading of the subtle changes of weather that would have impressed their ancient tower-building and space-traveling ancestors beyond their ability to express.

Rho felt rather than thought these transcendent realities as he looked ahead to the future. But imposing itself unbidden in this rare moment of emotional perception was the brutal horror of what he had done not many hours before. Brutal, but necessary and justified, a cleansing and a retribution. The slaughter of a whole community of insan-hayawan, those who had murdered the entire family and tribe of Angelus and Alamos.

He felt the horror, but no guilt. As mechanically brutal as the animal-humans were, they still were miracles, and beings with an individuality, and he pitied the creatures, and

even then they had not merited pity or any sympathy, no more than did a tick or mosquito. He remembered what had happened, what he and his crew had done:

As their dirigible had left behind the ice field where they had rescued Alamos and Yemoja, and providentially dropped over the area of the insan-hayawan swarm to the east, he could hear or rather feel a pulsing, booming throb, much like thunder or an avalanche in the distance, or a grouse beating its wings in the brush, and the throb was rhythmical, not perfectly so, but enough that Rho knew it was not natural. The sound irritated and infuriated him immensely. It did not belong. He had heard this throbbing before now, usually while hunting on the surface, and sometimes, rarely, from the air. It traveled long distances, it passed around rock formations and through thick stands of trees. When up close, it was impossible to tell from what direction it emanated. It was everywhere and always meant danger and death. It was the sound that haunted his dreams, and an imitation of it always accompanied the bloody, cautionary tales of the insan-hayawan he had heard as a child from his parents and uncles. As they approached the source, he swiveled his head side to side and got a directional bearing. As they drew nearer, precise pinpointing was not possible, but he knew the dirigible was closing in because the throbbing grew louder. The aircraft cleared a band of trees that ran along a braided river. There!

All the batteries had been fully charged, even boosted beyond what was safe. The young children were shut up in cabins with Lafayette to mind them, and everyone else, even the farmer, had a projectile type weapon, though only the men and Angelus were given e-m rifles. Rho had talked them through, so they called their shots as to not waste power or arrows with simultaneous redundancy. Jay-Jay manned the primary cannon and targeted groups and the brushpile-like dwellings. The rest bore e-m hand guns, or bows. As everyone on the dirigible began shooting, the throbbing stopped suddenly and the animal-humans ran in every direction,

roaring and screaming. One large, nearly naked male, defiant, stood his ground and jumped up and down and waved an entire human leg as a club. (The leg was decidedly less hairy than his.) The male paused in his arrogant display, stared up unblinkingly, inhumanly straight into Rho's eyes and ripped a piece from the leg with his teeth. Rho coldly removed the already depleted battery from his rifle, changed in a fresh one, and shot the male's head clean off at the neck. The body fell back in a heap. His crew on the dirigible shot everything that moved—shot again and again until nothing moved, and even then, they continued until all the batteries gave out.

This they accomplished in one pass of the dirigible, as only one pass was possible. Rho had spotted the drum and invested one shot on the hated device. He knew both from the tales of his family and confirmation from Angelus that these instruments were made from human skin and the beaters from human bones. The fumes and smoke from electrically charged air and burned flesh drifted up and followed below them for an hour before it thinned and faded into nothing.

Rho's mind returned to the present, and his eyes focused again on the subtly moving cloudscape around him and far away.

All was well. While his thoughts had been dwelling on the hours prior, had anything been amiss, it would have broken into his awareness instantly. JayJay, however, was standing right next to him. Silent, attentive, and patient.

"There you are," Rho said. "Turn on the radio scanners and the transponder and leave them on."

"Are you sure? That will make us vulnerable."

"We have to assume the risk. If we're rejoining my people someday, I don't want to surprise them. That would be far more dangerous. Let them get used to us. We're not hiding anymore."

Fifteen

Salt Miners & the Storm

The rescue of Alamos and Yemoja had taken place in the dead of the northern hemisphere winter, some days after the end of the Annuary gathering for the year. The next one wouldn't be for another 10 months, a long time. What should he do until then? Rho realized that joining his people with his new clan might bring them—his father especially—an unwelcome revision to how they viewed the world. It would be transforming if not revolutionary. Life on the surface was much better and much worse than Rho was taught to believe. The possible conflicts with his father dampened his enthusiasm. Yes, he could likely find and rejoin his family group long before the gathering, but he thought, if he appeared at the huge gathering with a few other families or flight groups, his father's reaction would be diluted and diffused. Surely, among his people, he would find some who would welcome them. In the meantime, he would explore the planet—not only having collected new people and genetics, but gathering information about the way things are on the surface that his people might find helpful.

In the days following the rescue, Rho often found Angelus in tears in their private room. The loss of her parents, relatives, and friends. He knew nothing that he could say would give her much comfort, so he just hugged her for as long as she wished, which was never long. She'd wipe her eyes and say, "We need to think about the baby. And we'll be joining your tribe someday soon." Rho sometimes would ask, "How is Alamos?" and she'd answer, "He doesn't say anything to me anymore. He has Yemoja."

So, the first order of business for their new journey was settling the disposition of the three surviving canines. As Rho expected, the feelings for keeping them were strong, but he

was shocked at the vehemence of their expression. Alamos, Yemoja, and even Angelus threatened to throw Rho overboard for even thinking of hurting them. JayJay thought they might be sold. Rho didn't care what Parvati thought. The farmers had no use for them, but the children had become attached. Only May shared Rho's settled opinion that they were, as she shouted one day, "dirty, smelly, disgusting creatures who have no place near a human dwelling."

Angelus took matters in hand and put an end to the controversy by saying finally, firmly to everyone, "We keep them. I'll teach my husband to hunt with them. Alamos will train them in manners. The children will feed them as they are already, plus they now will groom them, and clean up their pooping corner every single day, not just whenever it gets bad. A water bath with soap every seven days. Okay?"

The dog arrangement seemed to satisfy everyone, especially Rho, who was intrigued about learning a new hunting technique, but even more, was only too happy not to spend his energy and authority on a domestic issue, so that he could focus on the larger plans of travel and exploration, which would be challenging enough.

Low altitude circumnavigations were far from ideal as for speed, but because they had plenty of time to rendezvous with the next Annuary gathering, the reliable courses he charted through the dozens of the varied major air rivers and hundreds of smaller streams meant that they could fly almost anywhere. As far as Rho knew, nobody had done a survey like this for centuries. All that the hunting and gathering clans and castes knew was their own territories on the surface. Minerals, metals, and food sources were plentiful in their seasons, and no one had any urge to explore. But Rho knew there was so much happening in the world outside his people's experience. Expanding that knowledge was essential for their survival, and if their population began to grow in the future, even more for their prosperity. Besides, for him it was interesting.

The world of the surface abounded with life, and was

heavily populated not only with flora and fauna, but pockets of true and decent humans. The isolated masses of the original human survivors of the Chaos had died away, either from murdering each other, or predation from the animal-humans, or from elevated temperatures, wildfires, and in the long term, starvation. Most of those survivors had perished, but here and there a few of them adapted, learned, and found a way to live—to craft tools and methods, to raise children, to tell stories and pass on learning.

Rho and those other observers from his crew who, at low altitudes—but with their restored camouflage fully engaged—witnessed signs nearly everywhere of habitation in small villages and as nomads on prairies and steppes and in outposts on the slopes of high mountains. And, of course, the dwellers in the ruins of skyscrapers and on ships on the sea. Even tree and cave dwellers. One day, Angelus was taking a turn at a telescope and said she saw an artificial vessel emerge from below the sea, rising to the surface, and then people walking about on its deck. Not a whale. So, maybe the Toronto ferryman hadn't fabricated his story of a similar ship.

That night Rho looked up into the stars and wondered if some humans had managed to build a colony in orbit, or even on the Earth's natural satellite. There was nothing in the histories to say it was so. Or not so. In fanciful moments after he awoke from a dream, he even thought it feasible to have transcended across time to the past or the future.

Only when they crossed from north to south over Asia did they find true surprises. Rho's people had long supposed that no plants or animal life of any sort existed in the equatorial latitudes. Old post-Chaos images showed only bare earth and rock, and rare sculptures of charcoal. One night, Rho landed near a pond, intending to take water samples. The atmosphere was almost too humid and hot for him to breathe. He hoped that the water at least contained living bacteria, but when he stepped onto the ground, he realized samples and testing weren't necessary at all. Because all around him were plants, mostly succulents that happened to be flowering and

filling the air with an intoxicating scent. He looked closer and even saw brown straws of grasses. The air being so hot to him, he couldn't stay long, but he felt sure there were also pollinator insecta and other arthropods, rodents, birds, reptiles, hares, and possibly some of the higher predators.

All along on their journey, sky people near and far around the planet re-pinging them, and left short messages of greeting. These, the first radio communications Rho had received in years. He shunned a live conversation, only sending automated good wishes and his immediate flight path in return. Nothing came from his family. These communications were from people he did not know but who had heard of him—people who, for one reason or another, seldom attended the Annuary. They expressed curiosity about his adventures, and even admiration, and said they had not known until now he was still alive.

Some communicators asked if Rho needed additional crew members for his vessel, offering to send their young men who yearned for more adventure than their own family flights offered. Rho had always felt insecure with his large dirigible that was awkward and cumbersome in takeoffs and landings, and it was presently impossible to both fly the vessel in defensive maneuvers and fight at the same time, but he also was reluctant to take on strangers, particularly young unstable, disruptive males, and so one day as they were routinely climbing high enough to fly above a massive passing cyclone, he asked JayJay how to respond.

"Let me take care of it," JayJay said. "I'll ask around and find some suitable hands.

"No young men."

"Agreed. I don't want them pestering our women, especially Fay. And they eat a lot, too."

"And no old tyrants. I have enough problems being in charge as it is."

Within a week, JayJay had heard several dozen

recommendations and then interviewed three or so candidates, and in the end, he decided to take on the handful of survivors of a mixed-aged flight crew whose aircraft had crashed in the violent cyclone that Rho and company had just avoided. These two men, their wives, and three children had mercifully been plucked from a waterlogged, slowly sinking gondola floating helplessly in the ocean. The rescuer, named Roger, piloted an undersized dirigible named the *Golden Cloud* that could not securely carry all the extra weight. That dirigible, as it happened, was presently anchored on a land island within a few days of their present course.

"With every gain we lose something," JayJay told Rho after they picked up the new, still deeply traumatized people, and gave Roger materials and hands to begin repairs on his vessel. We'll gain some experienced, mature help, but they will bring their personal problems. "At the very least, they'll be grateful for you giving them a new chance in life."

"We need more people for the dirigible, and when they recover, these should do well. The fact that they survived attests to their strengths."

"They lost a child."

"Unimaginable…" Rho said and paused for a long time before concluding, "Let's see how they do."

They did surprisingly well. Not only as technical flyers, but his veteran crew members and children wanted to hear all about the adventure of the new people, who told the most exciting and dangerous parts over and over, patiently answering every question except about the lost baby, which was yet untouchable. The younger couple, Brackett and Whimsy, seemed to be natural storytellers. The other couple, Scotch and Larena, also fitted in with the crew if only to keep all and sunder in a continuous state of hilarity with loud voices, jokes, and laughter. The odd thing was whenever Brackett and Whimsy spoke, Scotch and Larena, unlike engaging in their usual interrupting and talking-over, almost always fell silent and listened, and Rho concluded this

reflected immense respect, probably because of something in their past history.

Because the story of the storm and their rescue was so popular, Rho conceived of an idea. He wasn't sure of his own intentions or what an outcome might be, but it seemed natural. Other people might enjoy hearing the story as well. He'd gather everyone together in a common room and have the new people tell of their adventure live over the short wave network. He'd remove all security from the transmission, send out a few advance teasers announcing the time of the broadcast, and send it on all channels. Angelus seemed most captivated by the story, and Rho asked her to record the teaser in her own voice and language, which Rho then had translated into the major languages in use. The new people had told their story so many times in pieces, Rho felt no rehearsal was needed.

Before the broadcast, Larena came to Rho and asked to speak with him privately. He and she walked to a place along the rail kept privately for his own space, a place for him to ponder and make command decisions in the open air.

"You may have heard that we lost a child in the storm," Larena said.

"I did hear, but no one said more. I've waited until you might be ready to talk about your loss."

"It wasn't me or Scotch. It was Whims and Brack. They can't talk about it yet. I just want to let you know, no one should ask about it in the program. They act like it never happened. They act like they are okay, but they're not. They definitely are not okay. When you hear about Brack's heroic actions to save us when we were in the water, this is his nature, but more, it was desperation to deny and forget. It was his rebellion against the storm and against death. His pain drove him, and drove Whimsy, too. It breaks my heart that their hearts are broken. And we, Scotch and me, we mourn the baby, too. She was a beautiful being." Without being able to control her voice, Larena laughed falsely, her sorrow pouring forth this way. She said more that Rho couldn't make

out, but then she paused, collecting herself, and repeated, "She was named after me. My goddaughter."

"I understand. Thank you for letting me know."

"One more thing: our children and Whimsy and Brack's child can't attend the program. They still have nightmares. Is there someone who can sit with them, and play some games? I was thinking one of the women."

"Yes. I'll ask Alamos and Yemoja. I have a feeling they won't attend either. They have their own nightmares."

When the hour came a few days later, everyone but Parvati and the two volunteer babysitters gathered in the common room, and the excitement was infectious. Scotch, grinning, kept making tickling movements toward various children in the room, and they would squirm and giggle, though he wasn't actually even close to them.

Surprisingly, Brackett and Whimsy were singers and had worked up a duet with which they began the broadcast. Rho nearly wept when he remembered how his people's worldwide programs started the same way. It also turned out that Whimsy had arranged a structure for the narration.

JayJay was to run the radio equipment. He said, "Everyone hush in, three, two, one," flipped a switch to begin recording, and pointed to Scotch.

"We, the four of us," and he gave their names, "are salt miners. And I need not explain the essential role salt plays in the human diet and physiology. It's small and it's huge." As he said this last bit, he physically shrank down small and squeaked out small and then jumped up huge, so that the children in the room laughed."

"Our people were salt miners long before we parted from the elders in the Asunder, which was 200 years ago, and we still are salt miners. Mostly we harvest in special plains around the globe, but recently we experimented with new desalinator-dehydrators that people can carry with them in their homes so they can make fresh water and keep the salt no matter where they are, and not have to depend upon trade."

Here, Brackett took over in his mild voice and precise

articulation. "Our fleet of four vessels, two of them small amphibious, and capable of floating on water or flying, had anchored next to a sheltered, waveless bay. And we had placed our water treatment machines on the shore. We ran hoses into the water. We had only been in the bay a few days. We went there because we knew a cyclone was coming, and we felt that the bay, which was surrounded by steep mountains, would protect us. Also, the location was—we thought, until too late when the mercury barometer crashed—outside of where the worst of the storm would be.

"The worst problem was, we weren't the only ones to seek shelter in the bay. As the winds began whipping the trees, rain poured down, waves rolled in, and a fleet of six raider vessels descended upon us out of the roiling gloom."

Whimsy pointed to Larena, who cleared her throat and took over. "We had heard of this band before. They had a reputation for approaching peacefully and befriending their victims, and once their prey trusted them and let their guard down, they would draw out knives and massacre everyone they didn't need. We recognized them by the shapes of their vessels. Their big aircraft and large numbers…"

Scotch, trembling with excitement, couldn't resist and jumped in to finish her sentence, "they scared hell out of us!"

Larena cleared her throat again to resume. "Our leader, Captain Brackett, gave silent orders to execute an emergency evacuation. He didn't need to say this tactic also required a stealth evacuation, because there were no shouts or calls. And as the raiders, seemingly relaxed, landed and set anchors, we, just as relaxed—seemingly, we hoped—made preparations to leave. Only a couple hundred meters stood between us and them. It all lasted forever.

"We were trying to load a water treatment device when the raiders sent over a party to talk…"

Again, Scotch jumped in. "We knew that the sharp-eyed bastards would see we were leaving, so…"

Larena: "…we couldn't wait any longer…"

Scotch: "And we launched!"

Larena: “abandoning our water treatment device and almost leaving two of our crew members!”

Whimsy waved hard at Scotch to try to suppress his enthusiasm. He dropped into his seat with a bump, and Larena continued. “The false parley party saw they had been tricked and, shouting angrily, pulled out pistols and began firing. We quickly rose out of range and they ran back to their dirigibles, some which had already launched to pursue us. One of our amphibious craft tangled in a tree and….”

At his point her voice failed her. She looked at Scotch to finish for her, but he too, was incapable.

“The raider destroyed them,” Whimsy said in her quiet voice. “We lost three of our friends. It’s a small craft and a small crew. The *Silver Ranger*. We destroyed the nearest of the raider ships in return.”

Brackett then continued the story.

“The moment we launched, two other of the raider ships pursued. We fired back and forth and blasted the one in the lead. The other vessel had at least twice our guns, and we had no other option but to escape into the storm. We learned too late that our location was just ahead of the oncoming eyewall. The raider ship and the straggling fourth one continued following us. The winds hit us hard, perhaps 100 knots or more, sending us scudding sideways, envelope-first, across the sky. One of the raider ships was instantly ripped into shreds. The other held together and kept on, like us, sideways. It was risky, but we fired all burners, hoping to climb above the storm, but all we managed was to right ourselves in the sky. The raiders matched our movements, but they were slower, and Scotch, here, was ready. When we turned vertical, he was able to line up a cannon.”

“And if I hadn’t blown the sons of bitches out of the sky,” Scotch blurted, “we wouldn’t be here today!”

Brackett paused a second before resuming. “All those people lost. Yes, likely we wouldn’t be here, but we still had to survive the storm. And it was only then that we noticed the other two of our own ships were gone. We had separated. It

would have been a miracle if we had stayed together. Or they might have been close, but invisible in the swirling mists, drowning rains, and shredded clouds. It didn't cross my mind then, but there was a danger of colliding with one of them. The air was violent beyond anything I'd ever seen up close. It was all we could do to lash ourselves to the frame of the gondola, hold on, and pray. Mother, holding on to our children, and me trying to hold on to the three of them. Our vestibular systems were awry, and not a soul aboard hadn't pumped their stomachs out to the deepest, dankest bilge water.

"The violence lasted a lifetime. Roaring, howling, strobing light, ripping fabric, creaking, whipping ropes and cords, roughly buffeting up and down, back and forth."

Brackett talked and talked. What he said was at times confused and nearly incoherent. He and Whimsy traded narration back and forth, elaborating on their fears, the shivering from wet and cold. The wind chill factor, the anxiety of the children. It was just him and his wife and children in all the world. No one else. The shouted and sometimes whispered attempts of the parents to reassure the children and each other. Scotch and Larena, who had been in a different section of the gondola, often interrupted to share similar or unique details of their experiences. It was as if they were reliving the horror all over again.

Parts of the vessel breaking off. The envelope mere rags, though somehow some helium trapped and keeping them airborne. Hunger. Thirst, even. Then suddenly waves breaking over the top of them and a long swelling up and down repeated on and on.

Unconsciousness, then strangely, quiet.

When Brackett comes into full awareness, Whimsy and the children are either in a coma or a brain-numbed daze. It is only them. The gondola a raft in a watery, undulating universe. The horizon, when it exists at all, so close. He carries his family up to the highest part of the gondola still above water. Whimsy comes around, but is weak. Brackett diving into the freezing water of the submerged cabins, hoping

to find goose down and wool blankets, and there they are, dry in weatherproof containers! Searching among the wreckage to find other survivors. Everyone, the other 10 crew members, blown off or drowned, or succumbed to cold. Scotch and Larena, hugging one another seeming to be dead, but a dim light of life still flickering. Together, Brackett and Whimsy nursing them to stability. Cutting a piece from the deflated envelope and rigging a sail. Casting off the dead. Returning under the water again and again to recover food and tools. The radio ruined, engaging the emergency beacon.

They drift for five days under the sun.

Then Roger, in the tiny unaccounted-for amphibious dirigible, shows up low in the sky. His vessel is a mess and waterlogged, but he picks them up and skates, surfs, and flies across the ocean water to the nearest island. Roger arranges for Rho to take them on as crew.

Brackett ceases the narration and silence fills the room. The radio is still broadcasting. The children, who had been listening enraptured, suddenly burst into noise and action, one of them beginning, and the others chiming in with demands for Roger. “Where is Roger? We want Roger’s story? Where’s Roger?

Angelus stood up to make them behave, but Whimsy put her hand on her shoulder. Angelus, understanding, stepped back.

All Whimsy needed to say in a voice barely audible above the noise was, “Please. Please. Hush, and I’ll tell you,” and the children stopped the ruckus.

“Roger needed to stay behind to fix his balloon and boat, but he will catch up with us someday soon. Roger is the real hero of our story. The rest of us, Brackett, Lorena, and Scotch, we only did what we needed to save ourselves and each other. Roger risked his life to save us. He didn’t have to, but he did. And you know something about real heroes? They never like to talk about themselves.”

She had no more to say. She hung her head and

rubbed her sweater's sleeve across her eyes. She was spent.

JayJay, seated at the radio and, watching everything, had forgotten he was in charge of the radio, or that there *was* a radio, and at Rho's urgent arm waving from across the room, remembered, leaned into the microphone and said, "Well, that's the story, what we promised. I don't know what more can be said." He took a deep breath and let it out in a burst. "So, hope you were edified by our broadcast. Seems like we should have some music now. Whimsy? No? Maybe someday we'll be back here with Roger's story someday. But that's all for now, this is JayJay on board the… We don't actually have a name for our vessel, do we? We need one."

By then Rho had walked over to stop JayJay's ramble, and just as he was saying, "I have a few name ideas," Rho switched off the microphone and powered down the radio.

Red Sky at Night, Aleutians, Summer 2024

Sixteen

The Annuary

The gathering this year would not be any sort of festival or celebratory time of Annuary for Saiph. It would be the second one without his son, Rho.

Not quite a year—10 months—after Rho and his crew had rescued Alamos and Yemoja from a certain frozen death on the far northern glacier and annihilated a horde of animal-humans, and nine or so months after Rho added the distressed salt miner survivors to his crew, Saiph had been moored into the growing Island for a whole day and had not yet left his dirigible. He wasn't looking forward to any of it, and weeks ago, prior to the preparation to navigating here, he actually had considered not coming at all. When they arrived, everyone else onboard had scampered away to meet friends and buyers. With Deneb and Chertan, Rho's oldest cousin, taking over the business aspect of their trading, there wasn't much for him to do here and he gazed into the distance, unconscious of all the incoming—late-coming—aircraft, and he fell into a reflective, somber reverie about the past.

His first reaction to his son's departure in the north—Rho's abandonment of his family—was to be shocked, and then angry, and then embarrassed, but then disappointed, and finally sad at his own failure. At first, he was ready to cut off his son in his own heart for turning away from his people and their beliefs—from the reality that those were based upon—and then hardening himself and living in that condition for the remainder of his life. That was his initial reaction, because at the time, Saiph didn't know what else to do. The thought that Rho had sought to live on the surface and possibly embrace the insan-hayawan—the animal-humans—and even mate with one of the bitches repulsed him. The fact that the animal-humans might instead kill and eat his son only seemed to

reinforce his feeling. He had experienced their depravity in person. Even more, he had heard the horror stories all of his life, as had his father and grandfather.

In the end, however, Saiph's mood and feeling settled into resigned sadness. There was a lot to be sad about at this point in his life. Many of those he knew had died from the ordinary wear of time. His other son, Deneb, would never have a wife and produce offspring. Grandchildren. Saiph would only be part of one more genetic line of his people that would die out. True, as many of his people did, he had preserved his own offspring's DNA—collected as babies—on the chance that replication technology would somehow be revived in the distant future, but having purely genetic descendants long after he was gone was nothing like having grandchildren who would remember and revere him, who would pass on the family adventure stories and jokes, anecdotes and songs. Children who would learn from him and his parents all the skills and knowledge they themselves and his ancestors had accumulated over generations. Even better, little girls who would themselves thrive and become mothers. No, the prospect of future cloning gave him no comfort.

Saiph withdrew from his meditation and refocused on the sky around him: a flight of dirigibles was arriving late to the Annuary gathering. Not too late, but well after the beginning of the two-three week event, the formation of all of his people who had planned and navigated well enough to reach the agreed-to coordinates, this year once again over the southeast Pacific Ocean. The gathering was the one time each year when everyone came together. When people saw doctors. Had dental work done. When brief in-person courtships were conducted, and toward the end, when the weddings took place. There was feasting, dancing, trading, drinking, the arranged exchanging of the young unmarried men between castes, men who wished to learn new skills and thought they might find a little more adventure with a non-family group. There was even a little secret gambling. During the gathering, it happened that more people than usual slept at

the same time, the necessity for watchfulness being less.

Saiph again shook off his brooding thoughts and watched the newcomer's preparations for docking onto the Island. He could see their nervous, excited faces occasionally glancing up and beaming toward him. He knew everything that was in their minds, all the hopeful expectations. The breeze was calm now, and there was little turbulence, so docking was proceeding smoothly. (This region was usually quiet and stable at this season of the year, which is why it became their preferred location centuries ago.) The brief, forced adjustments to their position in the air, done by brute strength by means of pedals, gears, chains, and propellers, assisted with battery power. Lines thrown into the hands of the docking assistants. The deflation of the hot air compartments. The guying of the gondola structure next to him and securing of the envelope—the stabilized hydrogen compartments. The newcomers performed all this with the ease of long practice. Their projected voices expressed excitement quite beyond Saiph's current capacity to appreciate.

His wife loved the gathering, and as soon as their own docking was complete, she had vanished. She would be out and about, gossiping among the women and admiring the children the whole time.

He smiled briefly when he remembered catching up with her in that year long ago when they were married, she nodding in sleep where she sat in her place in the circle. She was so intent on visiting, she never even stopped to nap. Other than that one time, and at the wedding, of course, he didn't see her the whole time of that gathering celebration.

Nor had he seen her at all this present time. He didn't mind fixing his own meals for a short period. The only family business was to trade their eiderdown and dehydrated protein harvests for supplies and parts—they especially needed a new composter—and to be looked over by doctors. Deneb would handle the trading. He had said he wasn't going to enter the glider sports this year. Saiph would eventually find a circle

somewhere and listen to music, even some poetry. It sounded better live in person than over the radio.

A fresh cloud of grief passed across him. Darkness and dampness. He broke into silent sobs, breathing in and out and in. He hardly knew how this happened. But in a brief time, the grief, like the cloud, moved on and away.

Rho was probably dead by now. But what if he wasn't? What would he, the father, do if Rho came back, or if he came upon him someplace on the surface? Would they speak? Or would they just ignore each other and pass by as if neither existed, a total tragedy in his culture that developed in a world so sparsely populated by humans. What if Rho did find a wife among the animal-humans and wished to present her to him? How could he pretend that this was in any way good or normal? He knew what his wife would do. She always placed relationships above principles, or even good taste. She would hug and kiss everyone, anyone. Saiph shuddered; he knew he could never be false and still respect himself. Worse than that, however, would be speaking his mind. It would be ugly, exposing ugliness, and to avoid such a scene, he knew he'd have to walk away in silence. Perhaps he could still love the son, but he could never love that part of his son's life, if he lived yet.

He pictured his son as the beautiful little boy he once was. The baby whose name, Rho Aquilae, was not a name, but only a letter designation for a minor star in the constellation Aquila, a star that left home and migrated into the tiny constellation of Delphinius. He missed his son as a child.

He felt as if his whole being screamed at these conditions of his life now. The intensity shocked him; it was something he had never felt before. But as excruciating as things seemed, these strong feelings were nothing so deadening as the settled resignation that was his native state. The screaming, the dread, and the deadness merged. It was frightening, and he was powerless to escape, as in a nightmare.

He shook himself and realized he had only dozed off. The screaming was the Island's alarms, the klaxons that

warned of a hostile invasion, probably of renegades. He ran to the outside edge of his dirigible. In the distance, he could see a large flight of dirigibles moving up onto the Island. Some of them were obviously of algolim design and color, with grotesquely imperfect camouflage. It all happened slowly as things do in the world of wind motivation. Minutes and minutes passed and the klaxons became silent, just as the defensive sailplanes, armed with e-m cannons, cleared the Island and sought rising columns of air to find positions to fire upon the invaders.

The algolim had never before dared to attack the Annuary Island, Saiph, thought. And their numbers seemed overwhelming. He wondered how he and his people could withstand them. Becoming so much weaker a consequence of a dwindling population.

A whisper of a thought passed before him. Perhaps this was his son returning? What if he had built a family? What if he discovered noble people on the surface? What if he brought reconciliation with the separated noble algolim and a hope for new life for his people? He imagined holding his son's babies. Babies of *both* sons. His grandbabies. Reading to and teaching them. For a moment, he pictured an immense sky full of colored Islands and indeed, a whole joyful world carefully rebuilding for the benefit of humankind after so many centuries of emptiness. After so long, the world cleansed, and nature restored.

But how could there be so many strange, hostile airships inexorably, aggressively moving toward them?

Just then, Rasalas rushed up breathless, and a moment later, Mirfak, who said, "The boys have launched in counterattack gliders. The women and children have begun fire watches. We are well-placed on the perimeter facing the main attack, so man the topside cannon and be ready!"

Seventeen

Wind & Welcome

The new people—the salt miners—continued to perform well, right after the radio broadcast and into the remaining months prior to their expected rendezvous with the Annuary…

Rho's expanded, remade, and increasingly skilled crew became with practice and repetition more and more proficient in all aspects of flight, and, except for landing now and then to explore or collect and hunt, their daily lives became routine and repetitious as if it had become the whole of their lives with no past and no other future; but even so, the surface-originating people never lost their sense of awe over the views of the planet that streamed before them. And of what they considered the miracle of their flight, of how they actually thrived and flourished so detached from the security of stationary, solid ground under their feet with so many resources right at hand. Rho could feel their awe also of him, he who was so confident and calm soaring with ease with them thousands of meters over measureless, raging seas, insurmountable mountains, deadly deserts, and through or above mazes of towering, tumultuous storm clouds and lightning, or in air sometimes so thin and cold to be almost no part of the Earth at all. When no duty demanded their focus, he often found them at the rail gazing off into the distance, sometimes with slight, faintly rapturous smiles. Only the younger children became unaware of the power and beauty of the expansive scenic views of the world. They could make a game of anything, and they delighted in any new little thing they found onboard or passing by—like migrating insects or a formation of birds—but for them, flying and the passing panorama had become ordinary. The children reminded him of himself when he was their age.

The pace of their travels could be said to be leisurely. With the addition of new, highly competent people, he had

plenty of time to think. He was excited about rejoining his people, if allowed, but there was one more familial matter besides his father's reaction that could rob them all of joyfulness. His brother had been jealous because Rho had won the chance to pick a wife, but she had died, and now Rho was returning with a wife—a different woman—and if all went well, a born child as well as his own clan, or what might be a new caste. He felt he needed to offer his brother the same chance he had.

One calm day, he decided to follow through with the idea coming to him earlier when he witnessed Lafayette petting the jungle fowl. And he requested her parents come to his cabin. They arrived, nervous.

As they haltingly came in the door, Lyonnell was saying, "I'm sorry, sir, if a smelly clébard or a child fouled the deck or done worse."

"Huh?" Rho said. "No, no. It's fine. They're all fine."

"That's good, that's good," Kay said, because…"

Rho feared being diverted from his purpose by a tedious dog or child story, so he jumped in with, "Okay, okay, let me start, then." As they stood there mutely, Rho paused so long that both parents began eyeing the door until he said, "Have a seat, please." Once they were more or less physically comfortable, they relaxed enough that Rho could begin.

"I wish to ask you if you'd consider arranging an introduction between your daughter, Layfayette, and an eligible young man I know well."

Lyonnell and Kay stared at Rho like this was the least likely thing they expected him to say. At last, Lyonnelle said, "You wouldn't be thinking of yourself, sir, because you've already met. Plus, two épouses is wonderful, but it does get, ah, trépidant—hectic—putting it delicately.

It's my younger brother. His name is Deneb.

"She's too young. This is too soon," Kay said firmly and stood up.

"She's right," Lyonnelle said. "But, ah, when Fay is

old enough to marry in a year or two, if your brother is like you, it would be an honor."

Rho tried to say he was only talking about an introduction, not a formal engagement, let alone scheduling a wedding, but Kay had already pulled the door open with an explosive jerk, catching the eavesdropping JayJay off balance. He regained his footing and said as they passed, "You might let Fay decide."

Lyonnelle turned around, walking backwards. He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness, meaning "What can I say?"

Babies. The first to be born was Parvati's. Rho had never been in the presence of a birth, not one he remembered, and he was worried. So, as insurance, they found an uninhabited place to moor in a high valley of a mountainous region near where Parvati herself had been born, to wait out the final weeks of her pregnancy. Lyonnelle assured him that both Kay and May were experienced midwives, and with Parvati's guidance they ranged the countryside to collect herbs her people had utilized as aides to birthing mothers. The youngsters with Alamos as a guardian, immediately ran off upon landing to explore and play, and only returned for meals and sleep. Other than some unusually loud cries quickly stifled, the birth came off trouble-free and a tiny human female emerged into their group for all to see. JayJay, the adoptive father, could not stop smiling.

Eight days later, Kay gave birth to a girl, and a week later, at the beginning of a spectacular surge of Lyrid meteorites in a dark sky, May birthed a boy. Rho hadn't known either of the mothers was with child, and indeed, because of their ample frames and dress, no one but Lyonnelle and Lafayette knew, and maybe Parvati. The pregnancy may explain why Lafayette's mother resisted the thought of losing her best helper. The family had been given JayJay's large, remote compartment as their own quarters, and both babies made their transitions quietly without disturbing a soul.

"Like chattes, they are," the beaming Lyonnelle said at the common dining table, and then suddenly fell abashed at his own candor. "Purring softly the whole time," he muttered.

May likewise muttered, rolling her eyes. "That's not how it was."

In the month of what the ancients dubbed August, Angelus' time drew near. Rho, who seldom became perturbed at anything, grew increasingly tense. Their baby would be a hybrid between people separated by centuries, and in both significant and superficial ways would be different from his, or her, parents. The importance of the child to him personally and to his people was incalculable. He began snapping orders and shouting at the children without provocation. So, when her belly bulged more than he thought possible, and later on when her waters broke, he panicked, sprinted up the ropes to the dirigible's top, startling JayJay, who was smoking some new pungent weed or other, and commanded, "Help me."

Relieved at not hearing a stern rebuke, JayJay needed no other prompting and asked no questions. As Rho clambered into the cockpit of the glider, JayJay undid the mooring ropes and pushed the aircraft over the side. Rho slid the canopy shut, engaged the seals, pulled the plane out of its dive, and breathed deeply. He hadn't consciously taken stock of the air conditions, but had been aware without thought that the local thermals would allow him to stay close to the dirigible and return safely, if he didn't stay out too long. Though having launched in a panic, he wasn't so out of control as to do something fatal. He soared high above and around the drifting dirigible, his mind empty of everything but the whistling of the wind on the protuberances of the aircraft and the rotating, swaying horizon around him. He wouldn't let his fears in. After a couple hours, as he became both drowsy and hungry, JayJay called him on the radio, saying, "You can return now. All is well."

"All is well? A boy or girl?"

"See for yourself."

JayJay and Alamos were able to hook him on at the

glider's second attempt. Rho left them to cinch everything, and once clear of the dirigible's envelope, he slid down ropes in a smooth, swift fall, landing on the deck with a thump.

He pushed through the crowd at the door of their sleeping compartment, and inside, Kay and May stood together on one side of the bed. Angelus was sitting up, her face pale and relaxed. The pink creature she held bundled at her breast was sucking greedily.

Rho gazed down in wonder. "A boy," Angelus said weakly.

Kay bent down and tucked another bundle into Angelus' arms.

"And a girl!" Angelus said, more strongly.

The relationship between Rho and Angelus normally was smooth. Because the people of the air had dwelled in close quarters with family members for so long, and because those more rebellious in nature left with the exodus of the "pirates," the sundered, they were genetically disposed to submit to the preferences of their elders so as to avoid conflict. The people of the surface also had discovered that a smooth social order promoted survival in a hostile world. But since the naming of children was not essential for survival, and because Angelus' disposition was not as easy-going as Rho's, she didn't at all like the names he had picked, and once her strength returned, made her preferences clear.

"Albireo and Cygni are in the constellation Cygnus, the swan," Rho had told her. "They're twin stars, more or less. I'll show you them next time they're up and we have a clear sky. They appear as one star to the naked eye, but there really are two. Deneb, my brother, is named for the brightest star in this constellation."

"Why should you get to name our babies?" Angelus said. "Mothers and aunts always name our babies."

"Albireo for the boy and Cygni for the girl. We thought there was one baby, but there were two. It's perfect. Our people haven't seen surviving twins in… I don't even

remember how long."

"I've picked Guillermos and Meriwethas."

Rho stared at her blankly. "Why these names? Are they names?"

By this time, May, Kay, Yemoja, and two children had gathered around. Arguments onboard were rare, and usually entertaining if not instructive, and almost never private.

May spoke up. "They were twins, explorers of the western territories of North America."

"Yes," Angelus said firmly. "Twin cities on the opposite sides of a great river were named after them."

Kay followed up, "Your children will be explorers of the future."

Rho continued to stare, perplexed, his face knotted into a question mark as he said the names over several times. He ran to a server screen and entered the supposed facts he had just heard. At last, the question in his face melted away like a low-lying morning fog and he said, "Oh, Lewis and Clark! William Lewis and Meriwether Clark." He read further. "Lewiston and Clarkston on the Columbia River."

"That's what we said!" May exclaimed. "Something like that."

"Okay, okay," Rho said, laughing. "Everyone please leave. Let Angelus and me talk about this between ourselves."

As the onlookers left, Kay asked Yemoja, "Have you picked a name for your baby when it comes?"

When the space was clear of others, even though ears not far away strained to catch any more discussion of names, Rho said, "Sorry, dear, but Lewis and Clark weren't twins. Not even brothers."

"The stars aren't twins, either. They're not even alive!"

"Well. So, is Yemoja pregnant? This is news to me."

"To me, as well. I'm not even sure Alamos knows. But Kay and May find out everything."

The controversy of the babies' names did not go away. The men tended to call them the sky names and the women the

earth names, though JayJay suggested that Rho name the boy and Angelus the girl. The children tended to call them varied and ever-changing blendings or shortenings of both. If the several babies on board, including the new twins, had any preferences about what to be called, they didn't care enough to tell anyone. They had their own ways of thinking of themselves and each other.

In the end, Angelus said, "We should let your father decide when we join him. It would honor him."

Rho thought his father's names for them might not be nice ones, but what he said was, "Your respect would make him happy, but my father would want to honor you."

One morning, as the days of Annuary gathering drew near and the dirigible had located itself tactically to join the moving Island, Alamos spotted a vessel of unusual design that had newly appeared on the southwestern horizon. Ordinarily, the horizon was so far away that nothing so small could be seen, but Rho's dirigible was flying only a few hundred meters above the surface, which was a coastal plane. Alamos alerted everyone. The unknown airship, once sighted, rose up quickly and found a fast-moving airflow that would bring the vessel right overhead—the ideal position for a surprise attack, if there had been cloud cover. Rho mentally prepared to order their defenses to be ready just in case, but waited to give the command. It would be an hour before they intersected, plenty of time to maneuver out of the reach of the stranger. But the stranger held back and never made any other move, so this was not an attempt to attack. Just then, JayJay ran up, breathless with excitement. "Someone's on the radio. They want to talk with you."

"Who is it? Someone you know? A claim to family?"

"He said he met you in the Andes mountains."

"The Andes!"

Rho rushed to the radio room and snatched up the microphone. "Acaqua! I never thought I'd meet you again. I have never forgotten you."

The voice that answered was somber, and it had the same odd accent Rho remembered from the sundered people. "I'm sorry, but Acaqua perished. I'm his brother Tubengat."

Rho was saddened, but not surprised. "How did he die? What happened?"

"I'll tell you, but I want first to ask permission to approach, so that we can talk face to face."

"How did he die? Tell me first."

"Pirates murdered him. Your angolim. Who you call algolim. It was six months ago. We want to join you. We've been tracking, and we know you've been on a course toward your Annuary gathering. We want to rejoin our people."

Rho was stunned. He never imagined such a thing. It took a half-minute for the idea to work through his brain. Tubengat waited and then repeated, "We want to rejoin our people after so many years. It's time."

"How many are you? How many airships?

Tubengat paused, either calculating or hesitating, and then he mumbled inaudibly.

"What was that?" Rho demanded. He thought this person might be concealing something.

"We have 56 vessels," he said, clearly now. "A dozen are with me, but the rest a little behind and probably still out of your radar range. They're waiting to see if you will accept us. They are capable of connecting with us before we reach the Annuary coordinates. And 56 is only about a third of our number out there, all those people around the globe we are in fellowship with."

The radio room was crowded by this time. Rho looked at the faces around him. Some were scared. The Toronto people seemed indifferent—they had had a lot of experience with people of all types. Alamos and Angelus showed they trusted him. JayJay only spoke and said. "I know this group. They're okay, as far as I know."

Rho clicked the microphone back on. "Good. We will hear what you have to say. I want all the details. We'll be ready for you to board when you arrive."

"If you make one false move, we will destroy you!" JayJay said loud enough to be picked up on the microphone."

"Understood," Tubengat said with a grin in his voice.

Rho then gave JayJay the microphone to finalize the terms for approaching, which were that the visitor should aim their cannons in a neutral direction and leave them unmanned, while Rho's cannons would be fully manned, batteries charged, and tracking the visitor's vessel. The visitor would drop in from above, and then Rho's vessel would toss out grappling hooks.

The air was calm and the turbulence minimal, so there was no problem conducting this regular operation.

The fact that Acaqua's brother entrusted his life to Rho and his apprehensive clan convinced Rho that the approaching sundered people were sincere.

Rho wept when he walked to the rail with binoculars and gazed southward toward the Annuary gathering, some miles away and drifting in company with the clouds all around.

He had known this reunion with his people and family would be trying and stressful, and an hour earlier he had lain down to rest in preparation, even if he wasn't sleepy. He opened up a skylight and watched the translucent grey-white cloud blanket floating overhead. That higher air mass moved faster than where their ship was situated. As precarious as his people's life was—always moving, always subject to wind and weather, the usually quiet, regular, steady, strong patterns and rhythms of the Earth's atmosphere calmed him. Problems were always anticipated and his people had learned to adapt and respond. The last image in his mind, before hearing the voice of Angelus, was of the planet turning under the stars. He rose back into consciousness. She sat down right next to him. The pressure of her body through his cover was warm. She had put some soft recorded harp music on in the room. "We are close now," she said.

Outside, everyone on the ship had gathered on the forward-facing rail. There was Angelus, Alamos, JayJay and Parvati, Lyonnelle and his wife Kay, Lafayette and all the children, including the twins and other babies, who were being handed around. The salt miners, too. So much body weight to the extent that the gondola tilted downward on that side.

Only Yemoja and May were not present with them. Yemoja's time was soon approaching—perhaps a matter of hours, and she was now resting quietly between contractions.

As everyone was scanning the sky, someone slipped up close beside Rho, who was surprised to find Lafayette pushing a brown, thick, handmade envelope to him below the rail, such that no one looking at them would notice anything. She said, "I heard about your brother. This is for him. Only for him." Then she moved a meter or so away from Rho, joining the other gawkers in watching for developments.

One of the children, a six or seven-year-old—filled with excitement at all the new activity around him and the spectacle of the Island—was nevertheless completely unaware of the real tension in the air and potential danger. He chose this moment to pipe up with a question that surely had been burning in his mind for a long, long time. "Captain Rho. How can we fly up in the air with the clouds?"

Kay gave him a gentle shove and whispered loud enough for all to hear, "Hush yourself, the captain is busy."

While never before bearing such momentous significance, tense situations much like this one had been fairly common all throughout Rho's life, and he knew how slowly the critical events before them would unfold. The child's question was important. Having been raised in the air, and flying being as natural to him as driving a horse cart to a person of the surface, none of his clan or tribe would have ever thought to ask such a thing. The physics and their symbolism had been absorbed mechanically. But he knew that the people of the land would in the future always wonder how it was possible, and so he tried to frame a simple answer, composing as he spoke.

"Clouds are made of water vapor, which is warmer than the air below. So, clouds float. And without warmth and wind, they would fall. Dirigibles need wind, too, he said. Without the hydrogen in our envelopes, the simplest of atoms, we would drop to the ground. We are lighter than air, but without the wind, we couldn't fly around the world and live. But it seems that the ground is no longer an enemy."

The child listened without blinking, but the puzzled expression never left his face. He raised his hand for permission to ask another question, but Kay took his hand and pulled him away, whispering, "The wind makes us fly, silly."

"But," the child said, "water is heavier than air."

A little later, when attention had diverted away, Rho glanced at the sealed envelope and read "Deneb" lettered on the front in an elaborate, looped script. Tucking the envelope into a pocket, his heart warmed. Pretty writing, he thought. Perhaps the awkward conversation with the girl's parents might bear fruit after all.

The next moment, he shifted back into business and quickly checked around him. The dozen sundered dirigibles in Acaqua's group were all behaving themselves. They remained behind him, above, below, and to the side, but still behind, their e-m cannons locked into the muzzle-up stance. The face-to-face meeting earlier with Tubengat was remarkable if only because it happened at all. Rho had asked him dozens of questions, a few of personal interest, but primarily what he thought his people would ask. Matters of their recent history, health, criminal elements among them, and resources they had available. Most importantly to Rho, Tubengat said many of his people had heard the dramatic story of the salt miners over the radio or by word of mouth. They were impressed that Rho had taken them on board and given them a home.

Rho looked to the sky behind. The others of the 56 sundered craft had caught up, and while they still remained out of visible range, they'd now be easily detectable by the Island's radar.

He presently took in the distant forward view. The

center of the Island, a massive, layered horizontal object, like a lenticular cloud, but to the knowledgeable eye, distinct from the true clouds and patches of clear blue sky, was surrounded by comparatively diminutive clusters of what reminded Rho of bubbles of lithobate eggs. Each of the clusters was comprised of cells, which, as he knew, were individual dirigibles moored to the Island. Most parts of the dirigibles closely matched the colors of the mass, but here and there other colors speckled and thereby disrupted the regularity in any attempt at concealment. Some of the colors—orange, pink, red, yellow, purple, and combinations—demonstrated the outright whimsy of the ship's captain, or else his jocular disrespect of the customs and long-established anxieties about discovery, those that first began during the Chaos.

The Island was impressive in size and accidental artistry, but even more so was the loose phalanx of accompanying aircraft—hundreds of unconcealed dirigibles which, for a multitude of reasons, were not moored to the main body of the Island. Some coming, some departing early, some unable to join because of their bad positions in the air, some under quarantine carrying contagious crew members or passengers. Two awkwardly remained entangled, having collided and fouled each other's rigging. Some just keeping distance for fun or privacy. And some placed in defense of the Island and carrying expert combat pilots and their heavily armed gliders mounted on their tops. These satellite dirigibles, as they were suspended all around and above and below the Island, gave visual depth and a perspective of the hugeness of the gathering and the space it occupied. All of it emotionally powerful in its beauty and humanity.

At that moment, Angelus took him by the arm and whispered in his ear. "Yemoja is giving birth. She's fine, but the baby is stressed, May says. We will need physicians the moment we hook on, or the baby will die."

Rho stared at Angelus with a fear in his face that shocked her.

"May says the baby is beyond her and Kay's abilities.

Alamos doesn't know yet."

Suddenly, in the tide of joy and excited nervousness in returning home, a wave of sadness and anxiety had overtaken Rho. The last time he had seen this view of the gathering was two years ago, when his fiancé Lyra was ill and dying. For a few moments, with the thought of the dying baby, he again mourned Lyra's loss and felt the same emptiness and despair of the past. That sorrow soon passed, and he noticed that even with the grandeur of the Island, the number of ships was smaller than he ever remembered them being before. And he thought he was bringing answers to his people's dwindling numbers, and now on his arrival, he would be asking for help.

JayJay, holding the big, heavy stereo telescope to his eyes, broke the spell. "I'm seeing sailplanes being launched. Oh! They have propellers and heavy solar fabric. Never seen that before. The first ones headed to us are taking up attack formations. Shall we prepare to defend ourselves?"

Now the radio's emergency frequency channel blared from behind. Rho had not heard anything on this channel for years. Over this time, he even forgot to turn it on, as it was a drain on power for no purpose. JayJay had engaged it, but hadn't mentioned it to Rho.

"Approaching armada. Do not continue. Do not continue. Immediately release buoyancy and drop 400 meters. Do not approach, or we will attack. Discontinue your approach and drop 400 meters or we will fire on you."

The message repeated word for word as the Island's combat sailplanes grew nearer. JayJay stood beside Rho, waiting for a command.

"Give me a microphone." JayJay handed Rho a portable mic, which he had ready in his hand. "It's turned to our transmitter on the emergency channel."

This is Rho Aquila. Repeat, I am Rho Aquila. Please hold off. Please hold off your attack. Let me speak with my father, Saiph. Tell him I'm Rho Aquila and I'm returning home. And I'm bringing friends of mine.

There was a long, long pause filled with muffled

voices, silence, and then a new voice came on the radio. It seemed strangled.

"I knew it was you, Rho!"

"Deneb?"

The voice came back, clearer, elated, "I knew it was you! Umm… just a moment." Then, there was a short pause and a single muffled voice in the background.

Father says… He says, 'Welcome. Welcome, all.'"

Welcome, all. Rho did not reply, but holding down the transmit button on the microphone, shouted to all those onboard and standing at the rail, "Okay, everyone! Get to your positions and start pedaling, or get out of the way. We have some tricky maneuvering ahead of us. If we aren't careful, we will miss our mooring!"

He again spoke into the radio's microphone. "New message. Emergency! We're bringing in a newborn baby who may not live without special medical treatment. We need physicians to meet us immediately as soon as possible. Repeat. We need physicians and equipment to meet us to save a baby *statim*. This is an emergency."

"Message received," the emotionless voice that had conveyed the warning came back. "Emergency. To save a newborn child. *Statim*." There was a brief pause and then, "You may dock near the central hub."

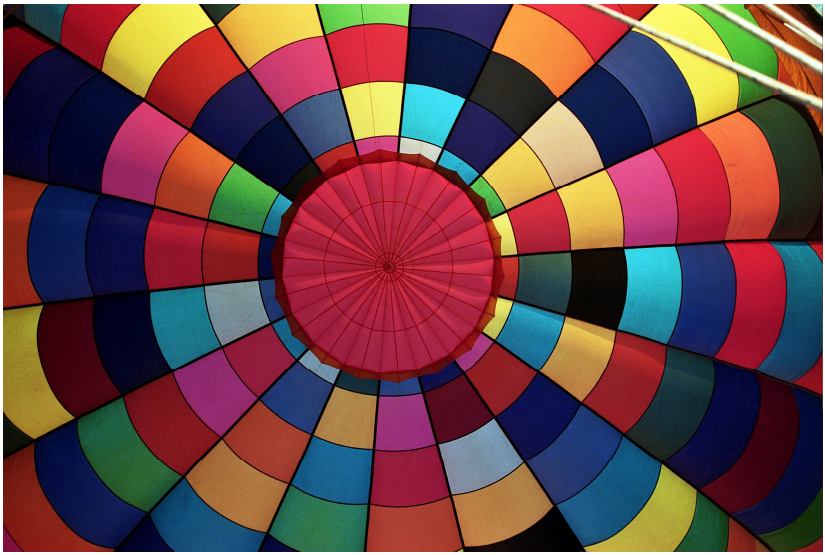
Lafayette, standing nearby and expertly cradling a twin in each arm, transferred one of the babies to the father, Rho, who turned to Angelus and said calmly, "Get May or Kay to come tell them what the new baby's medical issues are so the doctors can be prepared."

Angelus gazed at him, tears emerging around her eyes.

"The doctors will know what to do," Rho said. "Everything, everything will be fine."

And it was.

END of NOVEL



Clouds Fall to Earth
Extended Background Notes

Music
Originally, I hoped to arrange musical themes, one for each chapter, to accompany the story. My hope was to include a music CD with the book when it was published. I imagined the music to be a collection of solo piano in the spirit of Claude Debussy, or orchestration similar in sound to Ralph Vaughn Williams' "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis", or variations on traditional Norwegian Hardanger fiddle tunes. Perhaps including some traditional West African and Nepalese themes.

Clouds Fall to Earth (main theme)
The Bear
Pirate Attack
Wedding
Gliding the Polar Vortex
Ruins of Civilization
Birth in the Sky
Storms
Watching, Listening, Breathing
The Ocean Below
Stars Our Guide
The Earth Moves

Vocabulary: I use the words colony and flight interchangeably. The Latin word, *statis*, which appears in the finale paragraphs of the story, is the full version of the word, "STAT," which in emergency medicine today means, IMMEDIATELY.

Geography
Most of the story on land takes place in Alaska, though I don't usually identify it as such.

Language
The people of the sky speak Anglosi, which does not exist in the real world. Though there are exceptions in the story, the earth people do not speak Anglosi, but each locality has its own language

or dialect. The sky people possess an exhaustive database of human languages that existed up to and for some time after their departure. When the sundered pirates broke off, they built portable translators, some of which Rho acquired when he captured the pirate vessel. The speculative literary convention is that while such translators are often used, they are seldom mentioned, and the cumbersome process of live translation skipped over. That's the case in this story. They simply blend in, as do other human activities that contribute nothing special to the story.

That being said, the surface people of this story, as survivors, are adaptable and learn fast, especially those who travel. The genetically slow and weak died out long ago.

Names of Characters

The sky people are named after either stars or constellations. There is no particular significance to one or the other; that is, no relative value between them. Families tend to select names within their own family constellation, but it is not a rule. Also, there is a tendency to select names that fit their caste, but that's not a rule either. Exceptions to the general tendencies are common.

Rho's little brother is named **Deneb**, a star in Cygnus, the Swan. Deneb means Tail in Arabic. Deneb, the character, hunts with falcons.

Rho's finance is named **Lyra**. Lyra means "harp," and it is a southern constellation.

His father's name, **Saiph**, means "the sword." A star in Orion.

Mother's name is **Vela**, "the sail." Vela is a southern constellation.

Rho's paternal grandma is **Columba**, The Dove. She's deceased.

His paternal grandfather is named **Leo**.

Two uncles live in the flight. One is **Mirfak**, the other **Rasalas**. Mirfak is the elbow of Perseus. Named from maternal grandparents. Rasalas is a name from a star in constellation Leo. The full expression is Ras Elased Borealis, which means "head of the lion."

Rasalas is an alternate name. Maybe I will call him Ras Elased.

Mirfak's wife is deceased. Her name is **Aludra,** and it means the Virgin. He has two sons whose names are **Chertan** and **Chort**. They are rare non-identical twins aged 19. Their names are stars in the constellation Leo.

Rasalas's wife, Betria, is alive. They have two young sons and a married daughter whose husband has joined the flight. They have no children.

Cassio, daughter of Rasalas

Subra and **Duhr**, sons of Rasalas. Their names are also stars in Leo. They are ages 5 and 8.

Tarraz, short for Tarazed, Cassio's husband. His father's name is **Altair**.

The pirates are called "the **algolim**." Algol is a star in Perseus, "The Hero". Algol means "demon star."

Itai Auriga in Chapter Two is a storyteller. He is the son of **Edia Arcturus,** who was born Edward Slepyan, a Jewish historian who is the main character in my short story, "The Shoreless Ocean of Eternity," which is a prequel to CFE. Itai's mother is **Marisa Pavelich**. Edward is deceased, but Marisa is still alive. Itai was born in the 21st century, and with his parents moved to the present of the story when he was a baby by means of time transcendence. You may have noticed that Rho mentions this phenomenon once. Auriga is a small constellation with a common name of "The Chariot," a reference to the starship that brought Itai into the present time of the story. Arcturus is the fourth brightest star in the night sky. "Shoreless" appears in full later in this volume.

The name of the earth girl that Rho marries is **Angelus**. Her ancestors migrated north from Los Angeles when the floods came, though none of the descendants know this. Rho tells her. In the real world, the "Angelus Prayer" is the prayer of Mary, mother of Jesus, when an angel tells her she is pregnant with him.

Alamos and his sister Angelus**.** They and their father **Manteco** are named for places, as is their mother, **Modesta**.

Parvati, a Nepalese name—the name of a Hindu goddess.

JayJay. When I was writing out the first draft, I didn't want to pause to research for names, so I just assigned random letters, like XX, This character had been given the letters JJ, so to save time, and to add the realism of variety, I just called him JayJay. He does seem to be a JayJay.

Yemoja, a name originating in West Africa, where she is from. Yemoja is a major water spirit of the Yoruba religion. She is said to be the mother of all humanity. There is extensive material on her on the internet.

Lyonnelle, the farmer. His name just popped into my head. I spent a little more time coming up with **Kay** and **May**, his sister wives. Their names had to be short and rhyme. I enjoy the humor of this situation. I can easily imagine all kinds of awkward scenarios, but for several reasons, they wouldn't fit into this book. The sisters are pretty much interchangeable except when it comes to dogs. In a longer tale, I'd write a lot more about them.

Layfayette, daughter of Lyonelle and Kay. There's no word I know for her relation to May. Niece of JayJay. "Fay," for short—more confusion. The names of dad and daughter suggest French.

The brothers **Acaqua** and **Tubengat** are named for high mountains in the Andes range.

Scotch and **Larena**, **Brackett** and **Whimsy** are named similar to people we know. I hope I've treated them well.

Roger, the heroic salt miner. He's just a Roger, and nobody else.

The sky people do not name their aircraft like water sailors name their boats, but I've made two exceptions, the amphibious airships of the salt miners. Roger's craft, the ***Golden Cloud*****,** is named for the best-known horse of the 1950s television cowboy, Roy Rogers, who changed from his steed's original name to Trigger. The ***Silver Ranger*** is named for the Lone Ranger's horse, Silver.

The earth people call themselves '**the people**," same as the sky people do. People don't usually name themselves.
Most of the animals are named from either their Latin genus or

species names. Exception, birds. Lyonnelle tosses in a little French now and then.

Patterns of Sleep
Because they are continuously moving through time zones, and because living in the air, same as living on the ocean, requires alertness around the clock, the sky people have lost their natural circadian rhythm of day and night. They tend to sleep more when it is dark and be awake when it is light, but they don't always, and instead just take naps when they get sleepy. They almost never sleep more than two hours at a time, and often only 20 minutes.

The Currency of Eiderdown
This is an explanation in Rho's words to Manteco, not recorded in the text of the narration: "Our medium of exchange is eiderdown, which is the down of three species of ducks. Eiderdown is the finest quality of all downs. This down is unique in that it clings to itself, giving it superior lofting and insulating quality. We use it in our clothing for lightweight warmth for the cold of winter seasons and when we soar high into the atmosphere, but we also sew it into bags for trading. Our family collects eiderdown by hand from nests along far northern coastlines, and we do this without disturbing the ducks. We only collect about 20 grams of down from each nest per year. The down is colored from brown to nearly black. After we gather the down, we wash, dry, and then separate it into grades, the best being from mature birds. The eiderdown is then certified at our annual Gathering. Other down is used too, but it has purely utilitarian value. Algolim sometimes try to use utility down as currency and counterfeit the certifications."

From the Down Association of Canada: Down and feathers are carefully washed with special processes, rinsed, dried, and then separated into different grades by blowing. This is done in a separator consisting of several large bins. The largest feathers, which are the heaviest, fall into the first bins, followed by medium, then small feathers. The large, mature down is next, followed lastly by the immature downs. The careful cleaning and grading process must be properly done, in order to permanently eliminate odors and to ensure permanent lofting of the down.

Pirates
The pirates (algolim, raiders) are among the sky people who left 200 years previously. Some, but not all of them raid both the earth people and their own sky brethren, or cousins. They use the earth people as slaves sometimes, though it is not common. The captive earth people find it nearly impossible to adapt to life in the sky with pirates. The pirates carry diseases they have acquired from molesting the corrupted earth people. When they raid, their intention is to steal, and not kill, but they are reckless and most of them will kill inadvertently or when they believe it is necessary.

Origin of Story
The writing of the story began in 2011 after I finished my novel *Universal Man*. The story creation progressed over time with long stretches of inactivity, as long as a year or more. The story began in part as mental images I created to help me go back to sleep in the middle of the night, images of drifting through the sky around the world in a lighter-than-air-vessel.

Story Elements
Written on 3/7/11. The people of the sky carry a deep prejudice against the insan-hayawan that originated from when the people left the ground behind. They refer to this leaving as "the departure." Humans had been experimenting with mixing animal genetics into their own, and after the departure, this contributed to the further degradation of civilization when the animal-humans escaped into the population and began breeding among themselves and with full-humans. The animal-humans, while having superior senses and other physical strength, were intellectually stunted, but the worst of it was that their human conscience was weak or non-existent. Another factor in the breakdown of civilization was the rampant increase of identity disorder and its institutionalization into the social order, so that when the seas began to rise and land became scarce, the foundations—the cultural superstructure of society that marriage and family gives—had already been weakened beyond repair. This is what brought about the general madness, the

cannibalism, the abandonment of all moral restraint, the mass killings, the spontaneous, random killing between friends and family members, and then the rampant diseases which all but wiped out all human life that existed on the ground. For years, the departing people hid in the air until all became quiet on the ground. Factories no longer belched smoke. The cities that had not burnt became dark, radio and television transmissions ceased entirely. Satellites broke down, got hit by meteors, fell out of orbit. Air pollution vanished and the seas cleaned themselves. And yet, some insan-hayawan survived, and as the centuries unfolded, their numbers grew. But still, the sky people stayed away, they only descended to the ground when necessary, and some of them became specialists at this.

The above is from the perspective of the sky people. When Rho dwells among the insan-hayawan, he hears additional material from Angelus's father. In time, most of the insan-hayawan were killed. Some of them survive in small pockets, and they now are little more than super-intelligent apes—they use a few tools, but they do not build, and they typically do not dwell in social units larger than a female with a few young ones. After the collapse, those masses who had identity disorders died out; nature herself had purged them by two methods, the first being that the lifestyle, the psychology itself, the cultural support, was not sustainable without an indulgent standard of life, with abundant, excessive resources. The second method being that they did not reproduce, and they simply died out. There still are and always will be people who are confused, but in the present they are rare.

This explanation above is an interpretation of legends told by a tribal leader among the uncorrupted "insan-hayawan," stories passed on orally, and not from recorded history. They are limited in scope, since the survivors and their descendants did not have the means to keep records, though one woman in Angelus's tribe learned to read and write, these skills secretly passed down from generation to generation and feared by many of the people.

Lighter Than Air Flight These below are prompts I attempted to use in the creation of the cover. They are a generic description of the vessels of the sky people, but each dirigible is different, as is each home in our real world.

"An aircraft that is a cross between a Rozière balloon and a

zeppelin, the envelope being 5 times larger than the gondola. The texture of the envelope fabric will have a network of fine black lines, suggesting solar panels. Smaller battery packs lashed to the gondola will replace fuel tanks. The solid wall gondola will be cubic in shape, the edges rounded, and with dimensions of 18 feet wide, 24 feet long and 7 feet tall. No windows. Added to this dimension is a balcony of 3 feet wide with a 44-inch high handrail. The exterior of the gondola appears as tightly woven wicker. Anchoring ropes will be visible, coiled on the side of the balcony, eight anchoring ropes, two of them beside each corner. Also visible are sandbags. Mounted on two opposing corners will be 3-inch bore titanium electromagnetic cannons, 4 feet long, each with a battery pack. A large propeller is mounted on one end of the gondola. On top of the envelope is a rigid-wing sailplane. The general impression of the aircraft from a distance will be as a cloud."

The Rozière is a two-chambered envelope, one of the chambers being non-heated gas, primarily helium or hydrogen, the other chamber plain air. This design offers the ability to stay aloft for long periods, and in the real world, enabled humans to fly completely around the world in one pass. The history of these voyages and indeed the entire history of lighter-than-air flight is fascinating, and well documented.

Many aspects of this story were influenced by the naval adventures written by Patrick O'Brian. There are similarities between sailing the oceans of the world and sailing the skies.

Clouds. When I first conceived this story, I had hoped to become an expert on cloud formations and astronavigation. My writing style is layering. I begin with a rough outline and a beginning and an end. A final layer, I thought, was to go back and add details of clouds as they appear in the story. That never happened. In my whole life, I've never become an expert on anything, but I thought here lately (4/4/25) to search for and find an approachable book on clouds to recommend in these notes. The answer was already at hand, someone whose work I've known and loved for decades.

Eric Sloane (1905-1985) was an American artist and writer. He wrote and illustrated several different books on weather and forecasting. Those available in print are:
+*Eric Sloane's Weather Book* (1952)

+*Eric Sloane's Almanac and Weather Forecaster* (1955)
+*The Book of Storms* (1956)
+*Look at the Sky and Tell the Weather* (1961)
+*Folklore of American Weather* (1963)

Fun info: Eric Sloane is not his real name, but he adopted it as an author. "Eric" is from America. Sloane was his art teacher.

An Alternative Ending to the Story, March 29, 2011

When Rho and his insan-hayawan wife, Angelus, bear a child, she begins to think about how this will answer the need of the sky people to continue their lives in the air. But Rho knows that his father and the rest of the elders will not accept this method—their prejudices against the insan-hayawan are too strong. But Angelus believes that the child will make the difference, that Rho's father will not reject the child. Rho says that the leap will be too far for him, but he decides to try anyway—try to bring the child to him. He thinks of a plan to accomplish this, and he and Angelus and her brother talk it over. Rho will take the child to the Thanksgiving Gathering and meet his father there. But Angelus's brother has a different idea. He remembers a legend of his people about a baby put into a basket and floated in the water of a river. The baby is found by the princess of another, more powerful tribe and adopted by her. When that baby grows up, he becomes the salvation of his people when he leads them into freedom. Rho knows this legend and is amazed the insan-hayawan know it too. He decides to try a version of this idea. By careful planning and monitoring the people of the sky by his radio, he knows where is father's flight will be hunting near them next. He builds a blind near an abandoned village and lights some of the houses on fire. It will look as pirates had raided the village. When Rho's little brother and some of the other men go to investigate, they find the baby. Rho knows that they will not kill the baby, but they might leave it behind to die. If they take it, Rho knows that they have decided to adopt the baby. They will know it is of mixed race, but will think that the father of the baby is one of the pirates who raped an insan-hayawan woman, and that the baby was left behind when the earth-bound people fled the village. Rho's father will believe that the insan-hayawan are not as degraded as he supposed, that though they *might* have abandoned it, possibly they did not, but left it behind unintentionally. This is

what he thinks and what happens and it proves that Rho's father's heart is opened up to accept the baby and the possibility of the intermarriage of the sky and earth people. Rho then emerges and says that the baby is his and he introduces Angelus to them. His father weeps and hugs Rho, and then hugs Angelus.

A prequel to the active timeline of CFE**, The Shoreless Ocean of Eternity,** follows next in this volume. The story was first published in my book, ***When Earth Whispers & Other Mostly Speculative Tales***. I appear by name as a character within the CFE universe through *Shoreless*, via another short story of mine, *Ships Passing…*, all three of the stories are interconnected. My Jonathan Barron, Paranormal Investigator, stories are also connected to these, but I'll leave you to figure out how.

Wrangell-St. Elias Mountains & the Moon, Summer 2024

The Shoreless Ocean of Eternity

A prequel to Clouds Fall to Earth

Before the seas rose and covered much of the land, and before the Great Chaos overwhelmed civilization on Earth, the State of Israel in Exile devised a plan to prevent the breakdown from beginning to happen in the first place.

~

A man of medium height and dark, receding hair stood back from the door and looked up at the imposing edifice. The building was not particularly large, but it preserved memories of fear, death, and unthinkable horror. Not a prison, but containing the memory of prisons, the remembrances of prisoners. He put the keys into his pocket and said to the young woman beside him, "It's closed then."

The man, Edward Slepyan, and his fiancée Marisa Pavelich, unlocked their bicycles and pushed them up the empty Wallenberg Place toward the National Mall in Washington. At the top of the incline, they mounted and pedaled toward the bridge that would take them across the Potomac River to Arlington and their separate apartments.

Without explaining, Slepyan veered off the sidewalk. Under the shade of an elm tree, he dropped his bike and fell, face-downward. Marisa put her bike on the ground and sat beside him in the grass.

"I know what you're feeling," she said.

"My whole life's study, my life's work is closed," he said from the hollow space under his arm.

"You *were* the last member of the museum council to quit."

"It made no difference."

Just then, an armored vehicle rumbled up, and from it approached a man wearing an open-collared, dark green shirt and dungarees. Slepyan sat up. Soldiers took positions around the vehicle, but the man advanced alone.

"Dr. Edward Slepyan," he said. "I need to talk with you."

"Who are you?"

The man smoothly crouched down on his haunches, his thigh and shoulder muscles pressing against his clothing. "My name is Colonel Weizman, and I represent the government of Israel. I heard about the museum, and that your university has been closed for

some time. I have a job offer for you."

Weizman showed Slepyan his identification.

Slepyan glanced to Marisa for a clue about the sudden appearance of Weizman, but she just shrugged her shoulders. "Okay, I'm interested," he said.

"It involves travel, much travel, and time away from home. Much more than you're thinking. Before I explain, I must ask you a question."

At that moment, an explosion boomed in the distance. No one flinched, though all looked in the direction of the sound.

Weizman resumed. "What if the Holocaust never happened?"

Slepyan scoffed. "Let's go, Marisa." He moved to take up his bicycle. "He's a lunatic."

"No, no. I'm sorry," Weizman said, rising to his feet. "I mean, what if you could *prevent* the Holocaust from happening? What if those millions of Jews, our people, had not been murdered? What if seeds of Shoah had not germinated again?"

"My people too, sir," Marisa interjected. "I've adopted them."

"I understand. Wouldn't the world be a better place? Think of the contributions to humanity the murdered could, would have made. In culture, the arts, in medicine and technology. Is it possible we could have saved the world from this looming darkness?"

Slepyan gave the man a penetrating look. "I have to answer these ridiculous questions to get this job?"

"Answers are the job."

Slepyan petted his stubbly beard. "Okay. This is absurd, but you'd have to change human nature, or travel back in time and intervene. Umm. Morally, we couldn't kill Hitler as a child. You'd have to stop him early in his career. That would be the simplest way, but simple is impossible."

"When exactly? When to stop Hitler?"

"The latest possible moment, but early enough to divert Germany's course. Early 1930s. How can reconstructing history save us?"

"One more question, Dr. Slepyan. Would you have consented to Hitler's assassination?"

"Yes, but he was supernaturally protected, it seems."

"Ah, supernaturally… I want you to watch this film. Take it home. Watch it with Ms. Pavelich. And will you meet me tomorrow at the Canadian embassy? That's where I'm staying. As you know, our embassy in D.C. was destroyed. Here's my card, and the movie.

This is what we're prepared to pay you." He handed Slepyan a sealed envelope. "We can pick you up prior to noon."

"I think it's safe enough to ride."

"Then, Dr. Slepyan, arrive at noon, if you please. The embassy is on Pennsylvania intersecting Constitution. I'll meet you in the lobby. We'll have lunch. And do not talk about this with anyone."

"Can others watch the movie?" Marisa asked him.

"I don't care."

"Hey, I need to tell you something," Slepyan said.

"What is that?"

"My friends call me Eddie."

"Am I a friend?" Weizman asked, frowning.

"Can you call me Eddie?"

"I'm afraid not." Weizman turned and walked away.

Edward and Marisa watched him for a moment and then rode their bicycles past the untended, weedy, graffiti-marred FDR Memorial. Road traffic was light—mostly official governmental vehicles. Midway across the bridge, Marisa stopped, leaned her bike against the parapet, and gazed upriver. The smell was tolerable today because of a moderate breeze. If possible, the Potomac was higher than it had been in the morning. Within a month, its stagnant marsh water would certainly rise above the pavement of the bridge.

"What are you doing?" Edward asked.

She opened the envelope from Weizman. "Here's an active draft upon the Defense Commissary for a month's rations. A gift."

"Couldn't be true."

She smiled and said, "We can get married now."

"Why?"

"Our offer is" [she was reading] "three years' support for two, upon acceptance of the contract, and, after successful or unsuccessful completion of the mission, a self-sustaining home in Colorado at or above 9,000 feet, with lifetime support, or 20 million dollars in gold… for you or your survivors."

~

In the evening, they watched the movie at Marisa's penthouse apartment that she shared with five other single women—formerly professional women, since most were now unemployed. The apartment occupied two floors at the top of their building and overlooked the Potomac. In earlier days when it was standing, they would have seen the Washington Monument from their picture

windows. The apartment featured a rooftop patio and 24-hour guard service for the entire building.

A few roommates and their boyfriends joined them. For supper, Marisa prepared an elaborate hummus dip with paprika and whole chickpeas that she served with fresh-made flatbread. Edward brought some wine.

The movie told a variant of *The Time Machine*, by H.G. Wells. The producers crafted the film as if a documentary, but with well-known actors and the usual incredible special effects.

Scientists found that as the velocity of a space vessel pressed toward the theoretical speed limits of solid objects, the mass of the ship actually reduced, which allowed the thrust to grow, making it possible to break the light barrier in a year of increasing acceleration.

The movie showed the UNSS *Ironcloud* expanding and transforming into photons, the process preserving the conceptual integrities of the ship and its living passengers. From an outside observer's perspective—of the audience—the ship appeared as an enormous, racing comet.

Exactly when the *Ironcloud* exceeded the speed of light, the engines seemed to stop, and the stars behind it vanished. The ship maintained this rate for six and a half minutes, and one-third of the crew disappeared without warning, without a sound. The remainder of the crew returned to Earth. Surprisingly, as they neared Earth and came within radio range, mission control asked no questions about the disappearances.

"Why no questions?" Edward mouthed.

When the captain and crew were taken to be debriefed, all but a handful of the missing members were waiting for them—they had somehow journeyed millions of miles unaided. Analysts supposed that the crew members had made their daydreams of home into reality. But when a crew member told that he appeared *before* he originally left Earth, the analysts realized that the wandering crew members had transcended time.

The unrecovered people had become lost in the universe.

At this point, Edward whispered in Marisa's ear, "How does it relate to a job?"

"Shh!"

A crew now ventured to the past and tried to save the Earth, but all attempts failed, and the reason didn't emerge until they traveled far into the future, where humans had split into two subspecies, one

devolved into brutes and the other evolved into beings living in airships. There the sky people's historian explained a classic time travel paradox: altering the past to change an undesirable present invariably precluded the development of time travel.

When the film was over, everyone stood up and stretched. One of the boyfriends said, "Decent movie, but *we're* still trapped by the present. I feel worse now."

Edward and Marisa said nothing, as Weizman requested. They hugged, said goodnight, and Edward left.

~

The Embassy of Canada was surrounded by tanks and soldiers. Edward and Marisa locked their bicycles to a light pole as the homeless people sitting on nearby benches watched the activity around them. Weizman met the couple inside the initial security-check/reception area and escorted them through. They rode the elevator to a passageway below ground and entered a conference room with a domed ceiling and walls filled with changing panoramas of Canada—silent moving images from Canadian history, natural landscapes, and urban skylines. Twenty-four seats were tucked around a large square table, which was open in the middle. The table was set with fine dinner service and glasses.

"Straight to the point," Weizman said, "Good living. What do you like for lunch?"

Marisa said, "What do you have?"

Weizman spread his arms, his hands open. "Anything kosher. Everything. We're well stocked. We have greenhouses, too, for growing fruits and vegetables."

"Then I'll have salmon, grilled. Asparagus, steamed. Do you have asparagus? [Weizman smiled a yes.] A green salad with olive oil and vinegar, and boiled new potatoes, no butter, but sprinkled with parsley. And fruit salad for dessert."

"The same," Edward said.

"And for drink," Weizman said, "may I suggest a Pinot Noir?"

"Perfect," Marisa said.

"Living well," Weizman said, "is the business of our meeting. The film you saw last night is not science fiction. The story is invented, of course, but the science is genuine. Humans who surpass light speed enter a state of being that enables them to travel across time. Dr. Slepyan, you know more about the Holocaust than anyone else alive. You know Hitler's life. We're sending an expedition into

the past to change Hitler if we can: to alter his personality, to help him be healthy, or else to kill him. We need you as our guide."

Edward jumped up and walked around the room while gazing at the images. A mixture of anger and sadness darkened his face. He reached out and touched the wall.

"We're losing all the beauty," Weizman said. "Not only in Canada, but everywhere."

"Eddie doesn't believe you," Marisa said, suddenly tearful. "He doesn't understand why you're playing this elaborate game."

"Will you, Dr. Slepyan, will you accompany us on a three-year space voyage? You and Ms. Pavelich. You'll have to suspend your skepticism and come along for the ride. If you do nothing else, I guarantee the pay package."

"Even if you are lying about time travel?" Edward asked.

"Absolutely."

"May we think about it overnight?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Is there really even a spacecraft? Let's go, Marisa. I've heard enough from this crazy liar." He moved toward the door, but she remained seated.

The light in the room dimmed as the scene around them changed to show a near object, with stars and Earth in the background, the Earth turning below, the object spinning swiftly. If it had been lying on a sandy beach in miniature, Edward and Marisa would have thought it a pointed, spiraled sea shell.

"The UNSS *Chariot*," Weizman said. "That's a live image."

Edward sat down next to Marisa and took her hand.

Now they saw the inside of a comfortable home with wooden timbers and what looked like windows to a green forest outdoors. A woman was running a vacuum cleaner. She stopped the machine. "It's almost ready, sir."

"An onboard apartment, yours in fact," Weizman said.

The view moved into corridors and proceeded to tour other sections of the vessel, including areas of command and control.

"Okay," Edward said. "I've seen enough."

"Will you join us?" Weizman strangely emphasized the word "will."

The image transformed into one of stars, then the stars began swirling until they morphed into wooden barracks with bunks stacked three high. Emaciated, rag-clad men, some immobile, some shifting in slow motion, lay in rows on the bunks.

Edward's face grew pale as he gazed at the visual environment around him. "You removed one of my constructed videos from the museum." He seemed to be considering. Finally, he asked, "What do you think, Marisa?"

"I will, if you will. We don't have any other prospects. But imagine, we'll experience pre-war Germany first hand, and if we succeed, save so many lives."

"Yes," Edward said. "If Weizman is telling the truth, if time travel exists, it's the ultimate opportunity for a historian—and to obliterate what he most loathes—it would be a kind of redemption, a validation."

"And yet I have a concern," Marisa said. "Preventing the Holocaust is a sufficient purpose, but there's no guarantee this will halt the collapse of civilization, as you said it will. Most of the murdered were ordinary people and not leaders and innovators."

Weizman looked at Edward. "Dr. Slepyan has already addressed this issue in full."

"I wrote a paper. Weizman and those backing this project are counting on the redeeming nature of the Jewish people, but there's more. Even if the rhetoric is different, most governments, such as they are, operate on principles developed by the Nazis. They studied, applied, and are improving upon Nazi methods. In other words, the Holocaust was a prototype, and we're presently seeing a full implementation. The widespread, systematic slaughter of the developing nations will be everywhere soon."

"So," Marisa said, "kill both Hitler and the advance of his immoral philosophy."

"That's our hope," Weizman said. "And our calculations rate a strong probability of success."

"How strong?" Edward asked.

"About 20%. It's the only chance we have."

After a long, silent pause, Edward said, "Okay. One requirement. We want to get married first. Right, sweetheart? [She nodded.] Right away at Marisa's apartment, with as many friends as can come. However, I don't know if Rabbi Schildel can officiate."

Marisa puckered her face in frustration.

Colonel Weizman glanced at his watch. "Returning to your homes will allow you to collect personal items. But you must be escorted there and back."

At that moment, the walls and ceiling faded to white, the door to

the conference room opened, and people began entering and taking seats around the table until all were filled. There was no time for introductions because servants began carrying in food for everyone, and wine. There was little conversation.

Edward whispered to Marisa, "Did you notice that everyone has what we ordered?"

"I did."

"I don't remember a waiter."

After a few minutes of quiet eating, Marisa said, "The food is good, but it could be better."

Weizman stood up. "Most of you know each other, but I'd like to introduce our newest members. We have Marisa Pavelich, who, as you are aware, is a renowned chef. She has served in the White House and as a menu consultant for several museums. She also holds an advanced degree in dietetics."

Marisa nodded in acknowledgment.

"She's engaged to Dr. Edward Slepyan, former Chair of Holocaust Studies at Washington University. Dr. Slepyan pioneered the use of the Environment Quantum Computer as a tool for historical research."

Murmurs of satisfaction around the room.

"Anything either of you would like to say?"

Marisa braced, but did not move. Edward shook his head.

Weizman proceeded to introduce the others in the room—the ship's senior officers, including Captain Therreal, the ship's physician and his assistant, the Israeli military contingent consisting of two Mossad agents and eight combatants, and the cook and his helper.

"The Reverend Sonya Kim is our chaplain. Rev. Kim is not only a theologian, but a recognized neurophysicist. She'll be our time-travel coach. Lastly, to her right, we are honored to have the esteemed astroengineer and nuclear physicist, Nobel Laureate, Ralf Pachero-Nanez. Dr. Pachero-Nanez—"

"Call me Ralf," a man said and stood up, showing his remarkable height. "At some later time, I'd like to discuss with you, Professor Slepyan, your research with the EQC."

Edward bowed.

"Okay," Weizman said. "Dr. Pachero-Nanez developed the theory and created the propulsion systems that enable us to transcend the light barrier. Without him, time-travel would never have been possible."

"Excuse me." Ralf waved his arms in annoyance. "Time *does not* exist, and therefore one cannot *travel* through time any more than waltz through the intangible concept of a clock. We simply will be transcending the material-energy universe, when—" Ralf faltered as the Rev. Kim tugged on his jacket. "My lovely wife will explain later."

"I neglected to mention that he and Rev. Kim, though mature in years, recently married," Weizman said through a laugh politely echoed around the room.

Following that remark, Weizman adjourned the meeting. Marisa and Edward mingled until Weizman pulled them aside. "There will be plenty of *time* to get acquainted later. You have 18 hours for personal business, then you'll be shuttling to the ship at 0800 hours. Blessings to you on your wedding, and be sure to bring your recent research and notes. We already have your published material and the raw data from your EQC work in Germany."

"You have all that?"

"Yes. Yes, we do."

"I thought I knew all the locations of that data."

Weizman said nothing.

Motionless, Edward thought for a short while, then turned from Weizman. "Okay… Okay. Let's get married." He kissed Marisa on the lips.

~

Regrets about leaving and anxiety over the upcoming journey tempered the joy of the quickly arranged wedding. None of Eddie's or Marisa's parents or other relatives was able to attend. The guests comprised the crowd who watched the movie the evening before, additional friends, and former coworkers. The newlyweds spent the night in a private upper-floor suite at the Canadian embassy.

Weizman said the most difficult part of space travel for novices would be the initial, alarming shuttle ride to their ship, the UNSS *Chariot*, and this proved to be true if one discounted the boredom of the following year in a closed vessel with no wide terrestrial vistas, no weather, no change of seasons, no songs of birds and insects, no environmental variety whatsoever, and limited social contacts. Indeed, the *Chariot* became a prison, and the crew employed the coping mechanisms of prisoners throughout the ages: competitive games, intellectual pursuits, conversation, physical exercise, diverting food, dreams of escape or release, and, of course, work.

Only three notable situations occurred during the year of acceleration toward light speed. The first was that soon after the *Chariot's* departure, Marisa discovered she was pregnant—she and Eddie had taken preventative measures, but, alas, in the zeal of first intimacy, nature often thwarts and supersedes human intention.

The second notable situation was the friendship that grew between Eddie and Ralf Pachero-Nanez. They met at "the Park," as the crew called the common room featuring the same projection system as the Canadian embassy. It was the only place in the vessel that felt like an outdoor environment on Earth.

One day, Eddie and Ralf discussed the Environment Quantum Computer.

"Reading quantum flips in the material setting, classing them according to age by means of radioactive dating, processing them into cohesive data, and then coding the data into a visual/aural reproduction of historical events!" Ralf exclaimed. "Marvelous, Eddie! You would have to screen out so much, however—all the superfluous electromagnetism."

"I didn't develop the science, of course," Eddie said. "All I do—did—is give context to what we observed. We can pinpoint dates pretty close. We took quantum readers into Auschwitz, the preserved site, for example, and within a week, we had colorized images and sounds of actual events. Of unloading docks, of prisoner barracks, of the showers… We used these films at the Holocaust museum as an educational tool. They are tedious and slow, but all the more horrifying. We had scenes running 24 hours a day. Visitors stayed as long as they wished."

"It's almost time transcendence. The *Chariot* contains your quantum libraries from Germany and elsewhere? Marvelous."

"Only a fraction were ever interpreted and rendered into imagery," Eddie said.

"Certainly, we brought every potential resource, because we'll never afford to make this expedition again. We'll need to improvise."

"Ralf, your passion is time travel—transcendence, that is—and yet you focused on space."

"Speed, not space or time. My parents and grandparents were scientists. You know, my grandparents were born in Germany. I was a dreamer and read all the speculative fiction. But even the best time travel stories missed an essential factor. In order to travel through time, say from a particular place in the south of England, one must

also travel in space. Why so? Because the island of Britain is always moving. It spins around as the Earth rotates. The Earth revolves around the sun. The solar system moves within the Milky Way. The Milky Way migrates within the Local Group. The Local Group races away from the theoretical center of the Universe."

Eddie stared at the simulated creation around him that had faded from the main street of his hometown into tree silhouettes on the horizon, and above, stars and swirly galaxies, the present becoming past and swiftly being left behind by an emergent present.

Eddie looked at Ralf with an inquiring expression.

"An illustration is always helpful," Ralf said, smiling.

"I'm trying to imagine a fixed point in the universe."

Ralf laughed. "Don't! If this ship were moving at the correct velocity and on the right trajectory, it might actually be standing still. We're like a sailing vessel on the ocean, affected by leeward drift and nearly imperceptible currents. I never took interest in space travel, because space is too cold or hot and it's void of life, and I never believed time travel as such was possible, but if it were possible, we'd have to reach great momentum. The discovery of time transcendence was accidental."

The door to the Park opened, and light streaming in spoiled the artificial night sky. Marisa and Sonya entered, Sonya carrying a biopolymer box. The door closed, and Marisa looked up and said, "Lovely."

"I thought we'd join you for a late-night picnic," Sonya said. "Marisa and I assembled some food."

"What are we seeing now?" Marisa said, still looking up until she bumped into a chair.

"The view from our exact location, but without the gravity simulating spin," Ralf said.

"And that location is?" Marisa asked.

"It doesn't really matter, does it?"

"Marisa can't cook anything not exquisite," Sonya said.

~

The third notable situation was the training that Sonya began midway into the voyage. Nearly everyone, including Weizman, attended the sessions. The Mossad agents and the combatants kept apart from the others. They, apparently, had already prepared.

Sonya explained a fundamental aspect of time transcendence. "In the dream world, your powers of thought and action are limited.

Your mind floats along, flitting here and there, and you have negligible control over imaginary actions within the dream. Your body is all but immobile and paralyzed in bed. Consider that the supernatural world is to the natural world what the waking world is to the dream world. In the supernatural, you have incomparably more freedom and control over your mind and body than you do in your ordinary existence. When we cross over, when we accelerate past the light barrier, we will experience the true real."

~

The birth of a son to Eddie and Marisa coincided with the beginning of the vessel's conversion from matter into photonic energy. Marisa urged Eddie to name him Itai, and Eddie said, "Then, his name is Itai."

The couple found it difficult to distinguish between their elation with their child and an acute, exhilarating awareness of reality that came to them gradually during the final three months of acceleration. Marisa described it by saying, "It's like I'm waking up slowly, rising from deep muddy water into consciousness."

Sonya assured the parents that their baby would transcend time with them, he being subject to their will and love.

~

During the final formal time-training session in the Park, Sonya summarized the essentials to the assembled expedition members.

"We cannot overemphasize how important it is that, once we penetrate the light barrier, you focus. We cannot afford to lose anyone. Your will, the switch within you, propels you across times. We've practiced synchronizing our wills from the beginning of this program through consensus and submission exercises. Focus. We must will together to move the ship with us. As we all move ourselves simultaneously into 1933 at a specific date and precise time and location in orbit, we'll carry the *Chariot* along. Minus the *Chariot,* we'll be stranded, obviously, or worse, emerge in vacuous space. As I have said, if our intention is to arrive precisely together, it will be so."

"A question," Eddie said. "I thought there was a separate team, one attempting to influence Hitler in his youth, to save him from his mania. What happened to this plan?"

Weizman stood up. "I'm afraid we abandoned it. The outcomes are too uncertain."

Ralf gave a sudden start that caught everyone's attention, and

Eddie and Marisa both felt bewildered.

Sonya continued as if there had been no interruption. "Each of you will experience Infinity differently, likely in a metaphor dear to you. I see it as a grand cathedral. You must start visualizing it now, so you won't be surprised. Some of you… Captain Therreal, you haven't told me what your metaphor is."

"A wilderness trout stream," he said, and everyone laughed on top of him as he was saying "Fishing is paradise."

As mirth subsided, Sonya said, "A traveler will see each imagined time or world as from a distance, and go there, if he or she wishes, but it takes experience to navigate, and that's beyond your purpose. We may be in the realm of Infinity for only a heartbeat. Once we are in, you'll move out quickly. I won't be passing into 1933 with you. I'll remain inside Infinity as a medium, a link with our present." She looked around the room. "Any questions?"

Marisa spoke up. "Is there additional personal preparation?"

Sonya seemed lost in thought and then recollected herself. "Sorry. No. God is light; in him is no darkness. The supernatural world is like the natural one—you'll get along in one much the same as in the other, no special moral qualities required, although there are profound consequences for each action and idea, for good or evil.

"But not everyone is fit for climbing a Himalayan peak or swimming the English Channel, and Infinity has its own challenges. As your escort, I'm your protector, and that's sufficient. Alright. If there's nothing else, this concludes our formal training. If you haven't yet, you must memorize our destination coordinates, and you *will* be tested on them under stress conditions."

As people filed from the room, Sonya said over Colonel Weizman's shoulder, "I suggested that the commandos attend our summary session today. Why weren't they here?"

Weizman turned to her and did not speak.

"And what about the scuttled plan to save Hitler?"

He walked away.

~

One afternoon, Eddie fell asleep over his keyboard, which caused him to arrive late for his regular meeting with Ralf at the Park. When the Park's door slid open, he heard for an instant a loud voice shouting in German. Ralf and Weizman were standing face to face, both in an immobile attitude of suppressed anger. Weizman

glanced at Eddie and left the room. Ralf collapsed into a chair.

"What was that about?" Eddie said.

"An argument."

"Did I hear 'abscheulicher?' Abomination?"

"Perhaps you did," Ralf said wearily.

"I never thought Weizman liked you."

"Does he like anyone? The only reason I'm on this mission, Eddie, my friend, is to maintain the propulsion."

"Yes, I suppose so." Eddie pulled up a chair, settled into it, and spoke in the tone of friendly debate customary between them. "Recently, I've been reading your philosophical works. Your ideas about human free will seem contradictory. You write that it's a mechanism that gave humans an evolutionary advantage, and then you say that will, like time, doesn't exist—but only the appearance of will—it's an illusion. And you also write that human will is the one true moral value, the one that gives dignity to human beings. The singular characteristic of a person, you say, is the ability to make and enforce decisions. I thought you might provide an explanation for the apparent contradictions."

Ralf had been scowling and he leaped from his chair. "Forgive me," he said. "I'm upset and fatigued. We can't talk today. But I look forward to next time. Excuse me." And with that, he left the Park.

~

As they approached light speed, Eddie and Marisa noticed how every sensation, emotion, and thought became deeper, more intense, more brilliant. Each word they uttered suggested not only an entire spectrum of meanings and relationships with other words and the history of words, but concepts that felt more tangible than the objective item they represented. When they said "child," the idea almost became an actuality they could touch and hold. Speech between them became so substantial that it was as unbearable as it was unnecessary, so they gave it up. They also gave up eating and drinking, as there was no need.

They waited and it wasn't waiting, but only watching, listening, and thinking. Sonya called all the crew into the Park. Everyone was present, reclining in comfortable chairs, Eddie's arm around Marisa as she cuddled Itai. Each person experienced an instant of illumination, of clarity, recognition and infinite vision, of awe and fear, of agonizing pleasure and pain, of ecstasy and despair. Sonya

cried out, "Now!" and the next thing they knew, the *Chariot* seemed to be dim and motionless.

"Well," Ralf said, "is anyone missing?" He skipped around the room. "No? Is baby Itai here? Good!"

Each person exhibited a unique look of shock.

"We made it," Ralf said. "We're in orbit around planet Earth and the date is… November 2, 1933. Congratulations, everyone."

"It's normal to be depressed afterwards," Sonya said, standing in their midst, and she seemed to shimmer.

~

The Mossad agents took the shuttle to the surface and bought a neglected farm outside a village north of Essen, Germany, and when they settled the transaction, the core of the travelers moved into the farm's large house. Captain Therreal and a skeleton crew quartered aboard the *Chariot* and rotated down periodically. The agents and half the combatants fanned out over Europe to contact the future prospective leaders of Israel in Exile to ensure that they pursued the time transcendence project even if the Holocaust never happened. Sonya's ghost or spirit appeared from time to time.

Marisa and Eddie supervised the household and farm activities, the latter of which, except for Ralf's vegetable garden, they conducted minimally for appearances. Eddie set up a laboratory in the basement and continued analyzing EQC readings.

They reveled in the gentle environment of Earth, with its brisk, bright winter; with winds, rain, and soft sunlight, a relief from their stark abode during the previous year and compared to the polluted, decaying world they left behind. They enjoyed watching their baby boy grow. Weizman monitored everyone's activities and restricted travel away from the farm, but otherwise, Marisa and Eddie relished their peaceful day-by-day months of simple enjoyment and labor.

"If we aren't successful in preventing the Holocaust, I don't want to return to our own time—not with Itai," Marisa said early one spring morning as they strolled in the woods behind the barns. "Let's go someplace quiet and safe here."

~

Weizman, Ralf, and Eddie had concluded that the best time to eliminate Chancellor Hitler would be during the summer of 1934, prior to the September Nuremberg rally that initiated the strongest flourish yet of Nazi Socialism. With Hitler dead, the influential propaganda film, Triumph des Willens, would never be made.

German President Hindenburg, though ill, would still be alive and representing the old, more civil order; and the Nazis had not yet seized total control of Germany.

By means of the EQC technicians' research, Eddie determined the precise moment and place when Hitler should be killed and the sniper team could safely egress. On June 28, Hitler would be at a wedding reception at the Hotel Vereinshaus in Essen. On that day, before the "Night of Long Knives," Hitler's paranoia about German political rivals and Ernst Röhm of the SA, the Brownshirts, had risen to such a pitch and was so infective that the assassination would not provoke anti-Semite reprisals.

On the given morning, the combatants left from the farmhouse wearing ordinary street clothing and carrying two suitcases. Later, in the afternoon, Eddie, Marisa, Ralf, and the others gathered in the parlor and listened to the radio, expecting news of Hitler's death to come across the airwaves soon after an effective result. Captain Therreal joined them.

Deep into the evening, and the big band music seemed as if it would never end. Eddie played with the baby on the floor. Ralf played chess against himself. A fire burned low on the hearth. At some point, Captain Therreal looked up from the book he was reading. "Did you notice the music skip backwards?"

"You fell asleep," Eddie said.

Marisa entered the room carrying pitchers of beer.

"Let me help," Eddie said from the floor.

"Tray of mugs in the kitchen. You know, I felt dizzy in the keg room. It was weird."

"Go to bed."

"No, I'm fine. Whoa, there it is again."

Everyone had felt the skip this time.

"Earthquake?" Ralf said with unusual irony for him.

~

Not long after midnight, Colonel Weizman and his team drove up to the farm in their panel trucks. The combatants retired to their quarters in a remodeled barn, and Weizman wearily climbed the steps to the farmhouse and sank onto a sofa before a cheerless, cold fireplace.

They waited for him to speak.

He shook his head, saying the operation had failed. "Everything went smoothly. No one at the nightclub across the park from Hotel

Vereinshaus suspected that we weren't businessmen waiting for a train. The sniper team and I were stationed on the roof of the nightclub's building. Hitler stepped onto the hotel balcony for a breath of fresh air, as we predicted. He was drinking tea. Our man had him in his sights. 400 meters. Range, elevation, windage on his scope—all correct. The spotter accounted for the breeze. The sniper squeezed the trigger and the weapon fired. We felt the pressure of the cartridge's explosion. Head shot. We saw the target jerk and…"

"Then what?" Captain Therreal said.

"It was as if the weapon had not fired."

"What do you mean?"

"The weapon had not fired."

"How can that be?" Eddie said.

"It just was. Hitler held a teacup, just as before. I ordered for our spotter to check the figures, and our man fired again with the same result. We saw the target react, and the next instant, all was as if it had never happened. The cartridge was intact—the bullet never left the chamber."

Weizman scooted to the edge of the couch and continued.

"By then Hitler had re-entered the hotel ballroom and we shot through the massive window, with identical results but more obvious, since the bullet shattered the glass, which, the next instant was undamaged. Afterward, there was no other opportunity."

Everyone stared blankly, lost in devastation—or denial—that the mission so essential for the survival of civilization, and so heavily financed and outfitted, and so meticulously prepared, should progress so far and then fail at the critical moment, in the final small action.

"Hitler's survival is required for the discovery of time transcendence," Eddie said, trying to focus the group. "That's the only conclusion possible. He's not only responsible for the Holocaust, which is a provocateur of time transcendence, but the person Adolf Hitler himself is an origin."

"Or his descendant," Weizman said and eyed Ralf. "Why hasn't our brilliant scientist spoken?"

"Eddie's reasoning is intuitive," Ralf said, ignoring the inexplicable insult, "but transcendence theory isn't straightforward. Its paradoxes and contradictions are incoherent, not because it's too complex, but incoherent in essence. We're operating outside of the cause-and-effect universe. The laws within Infinity, or more

properly, Eternity, may be random."

"Which is to say, what?" Weizman asked.

"There might be another explanation," Ralf said.

"And that would be?" Weizman said.

Ralf didn't answer.

"Divine Providence," Marisa offered. "A will superior to ours. Anyhow, Adolf Hitler didn't father any offspring."

"We could investigate that," Eddie said.

"Trample a butterfly and modify the cosmos," Ralf said. "In whatever way Hitler affects time transcendence, it's certain what you witnessed, Colonel Weizman, is a causal loop. The rifleman pulled the trigger: Hitler was killed, and that revised the course of history so that time transcendence never occurred. If it never occurred, then we never crossed time and Hitler was never killed, which means that time transcendence could occur, which means we did appear here in 1933 and we did set up the assassination and our sniper placed his finger on the trigger."

"All that happened in a moment?" Marisa said.

"Perhaps," Ralf said, "and it appeared as if everything reset to the instant prior to the shot."

"That's the skip we felt," Marisa said. "What should we do next?"

"We could find a child born to Hitler," Eddie said.

"That won't prevent the Holocaust." Weizman leaned back against a couch pillow and closed his eyes. "We have a backup plan. The mission has changed. We can't kill Hitler, but we can annihilate as many high-ranking Nazis as possible, and it may weaken Hitler enough that he won't execute his 'final solution.'" He looked at Ralf. "Only Rev. Kim can tell us if we accomplish our goal."

"I expect her this evening, or by morning," Ralf said.

Marisa appeared to be listening for the baby who was sleeping upstairs. When the room fell silent except for the clock ticking on the mantelpiece, she said, "You all agreed that killing Hitler was the least disturbing action having the best result, right? Why should we give up? What if he produced a child instrumental to time transcendence, but in the next couple years? They didn't establish the ghettos until when?"

"The first one, 1939," Eddie said.

"Hitler had—has—a powerful effect on the German people," Ralf said. "His mere existence might inspire the difference."

They all were quiet for a minute and the cook's helper brought

in soup, bread, and wine for Weizman.

He heartily ate a few mouthfuls and then said, "We could talk forever. Dr. Slepyan, please research the Hitler offspring idea. If we find a family link between Der Führer and time transcendence—it's the most easily discoverable of the multitude of factors, isn't it?—then we proceed with killing Nazis for the present and endeavor not to disturb that linkage."

"Producing his own children never crossed Hitler's mind," Eddie said. "He was, in his perverse thinking, the father of all Germans."

~

Possible offspring of Adolf Hitler were *not* so easily discoverable. While Hitler was alleged to have had half a dozen affairs, two women appeared on the off-the-cuff high-probable list as mothers: Eva Braun, of course, and the British devotee, Unity Mitford. Eddie dismissed both of them as possibilities. Enough about them was known that they couldn't have concealed a pregnancy. If this person existed at all, it had to be someone hitherto unsuspected—a female secretary or a simple admirer. There were numerous women who might have been honored to serve a peculiar request of his, though it would be out of his character to engage in sexual activity with them. He was fastidious, Eddie thought. He married Eva Braun.

Eddie spent hours thinking about how to narrow down the search. While they possessed vast amounts of data recorded in a multitude of locations over long periods of time, it nevertheless included only a fraction of the totality of Hitler's life. They might not have the needed information at all.

He and Weizman set up parameters for an exhaustive data search. Much of the raw, unprocessed EQC material had been cataloged and coupled with all pertinent information on the Third Reich. The critical factors were person, place, and timeframe. With little hope of success, Eddie set the search in motion and asked the technicians to inform him if anything significant came up. Days passed while the computers plodded along, seemingly in slow motion, while in fact they were processing at lightning speed. Eddie quite forgot about the search. Indeed, in the pleasant daily routines of family chores, the entire mission faded into the background until one evening in early September, when a cool breeze foretold fall and approaching winter.

A tech ran up to him as he was rinsing soil from the garden implements he had been working with long after sunset. "The computers are done, Dr. Slepyan."

He hurried to the workroom in the basement. Marisa, Weizman, and a few of the Mossad fighters had gathered—a small, tense crowd. The tech beamed, relishing the drama. With an all-but-imperceptible flourish, he hit a single key and the screen opened to reveal a list of names, followed by places, timeframes, and percentages. The list filled the page; it filled three whole pages.

Eddie read the first two entries out loud. "1. Traudl Junge, Berlin Chancellery, April 1945. Match: 87.2%. Junge was his personal secretary. 2. Hanna Reitsch, Berghof, June 1944 or Berlin Chancellery, April 1945. Match: 83%."

He accessed the referencing material and summarized it out loud: "Reitsch and von Greim spent three days with Hitler at the Berghof on the occasion of Eva Braun's sister's wedding. Reitsch at that time said, 'The Führer must live so that Germany can live. The people demand it.' She was 32 years old. Hitler gave her and von Greim poison capsules in the remote chance of defeat and ordered that they mount a commemorative Luftwaffe bombing of Russian Soviet forces. He also requested for von Greim to keep secret watches on Himmler and Goering, both of whom Hitler suspected of disloyalty. General von Greim committed suicide about a year later. Hanna Reitsch died in 1979."

Eddie jumped up. "Let's start. Reitsch first."

Marisa groaned. "I'm going to bed. I've got a baby to nurse."

"If Reitsch bore a child," Eddie muttered to himself, "she must have given it up for adoption."

~

Eddie and the two EQC technicians worked through what remained of the night in the basement laboratory, Eddie catnapping on a cot while the computer filtered data and processed images. Not long after daybreak, the male technician said, "I've got something, Dr. Slepyan."

Eddie sat up from the cot in a mental fog and said only, "Oh."

"The Park would be better to see, but… Plenty of furtive love-making at the Berghof—one duet in a closet… Quite a social scene. We've not seen Hitler with anyone other than Eva. But what's this? Hitler is now on our monitor. He's alone."

Eddie stood up, and—with an unconscious grimace—watched

over the tech's shoulder. The scene concluded and he said, "You don't want this in the Park. When did they develop artificial insemination?"

The tech in a rolling chair flung himself the short distance to a general-use computer. "In practice, the late 1940s," he said. "Semen storage a limiting factor."

"Find out, will you? Who receives Hitler's semen?"

"Yes, sir."

Eddie paced up and down the floor. Marisa descended the stairs carrying a basket of fresh-baked cinnamon buns and a pot of coffee. The female tech on her cot yawned and stretched.

"Good morning, dear," Eddie said to Marisa. "You look lovely."

"You're crumpled," she said and poured him a cup.

He bit into one of the sweet buns.

"No. No thanks, I'm not hungry," the male tech said to Marisa's offer of a bun.

The female tech said, "I'm going upstairs for a bath."

Just as she left, Weizman came down appearing worn, as if he, too, had slept little; he observed awhile and left without saying a word.

"Okay," the tech said. "Hitler handed the vial to a nurse, then a woman took it, and… she applied it to herself with a syringe-like device in a bathroom."

"You're quick," Eddie said.

"Do you want to see the images?"

Weizman must have been waiting at the top of the stairs because he noisily clattered down and glared at the EQC monitor. A male combatant followed him and stood back.

"Let me see her face," Eddie said and waited. "Oh God, I was right. Hanna Reitsch. Though it's not proof a child ensued. We'd need to run her and Hitler's DNA, and then search our entire records, if not the population." He sighed. "It will take months to collect samples. And—"

"Not months, Slepyan," Weizman said, "Not months, but years for us to exhume Nazi war criminals and significant sympathizers, so we have Fräulein Reitsch on record. Hitler's DNA we've collected since we arrived. June of 1944 is too late to prevent the Holocaust, and early enough to limit its effect, but…"

He nodded to the combatant, who left by a door that led to concrete steps against a retaining wall up to ground level outside.

"We also ran Herr Pachero-Nanez's DNA overnight and believe he's the great-grandson of Adolf Hitler."

"I'm speechless," Eddie said.

"What you found, Dr. Slepyan, settles the matter." Weizman's eyes burned with an intense fire.

A long, taut half-minute passed with no one speaking, and then a muffled "pop" came from outside.

Eddie strode to the door, opened it, and climbed the steps. Weizman and the technician followed him. Marisa and crew members were standing on the back porch and looking toward the tree line where combatants, a man and a woman in farmer clothing, were shoveling.

Marisa said, "We heard the gunshot, too."

Eddie ran over. The combatants kept shoveling as Eddie gaped into the deep trench. Still exposed in the dirt, a hand, an arm in a jacket sleeve, and the jacket's shoulder. Soil partly hid a lumpish black bag.

"Who is it? What happened?" Eddie's voice trembled.

Weizman now reached the trench. "The Führer and his followers massacred not only millions of Jews, they destroyed generations of future descendants. We killed Hitler's sole descendant. The ledger is a bit more balanced."

"Ralf? You murdered Ralf? Oh, my God." Eddie sank to the ground and eased into the trench. He struggled with the black bag and undid the knot to see Ralf's face and damaged head, the soil beneath viscous with blood. Eddie looked up to Weizman. "What are you?" he said fiercely.

"We are men and women, progeny of Shoah survivors," a female combatant wearing camouflage fatigues said. A beauty, she had dark, reddish hair. "You, historian, must teach the world that tyrants will suffer the fate they inflict on others; they will lose all they hold dear. What we have done is a warning."

Suddenly tender, heartbroken, Eddie spoke to her in Hebrew. "All these months, our sister, and no one told me your name."

She stiffened and looked away.

"She won't disobey my silence order again," Weizman said. "Her name is Talia Hirsch. Her family's vineyard will soon be flooded in our present."

"You, Colonel, you are evil," Eddie said coldly and crawled from the trench.

"Evil begets evil."

"And evil begets evil forever and ever."

"There's more you should know," Weizman said. "Pachero-Nanez planned to give nuclear secrets to the Nazis. His computers contained formulas and schematics for an elementary neutron bomb. With it, the Germans could conquer the whole world."

"Ralf would never have done that. You know it."

"We don't. Hanna Reitsch was a loyal Nazi to the end of her life. Her only regret about the war was that Germany never invaded North America. Pachero-Nanez would have fulfilled the demands of his legacy."

"He only wanted to explore humanity," Eddie said. "He was a child. Our humanity is a greater kinship than blood, than family, than our Jewishness, or Aryanness. And you, you've lost your humanity. The best people are murdered by the worst, and the worst end up killing each other."

"Well…" Weizman said.

"This is my final word to you, Colonel. Repent."

Eddie stumbled light-headed toward the farmhouse where Marisa and the others had been held back by combatants. Weizman benignly watched him for a few moments.

"Pack in the dirt and scatter the overflow in the woods," Weizman ordered. "Conceal the scar."

A wail rose up from the direction of the house.

~

Filled with anger, Eddie hoped to convince Captain Therreal to arrest and confine Weizman. He first embraced Marisa until she ceased shuddering, then he went to find Therreal, who was tinkering with the shuttle concealed in an outbuilding.

Therreal set his palm computer on a counter. "I'm appalled…" With Eddie following him, he walked outside and gazed toward the farmhouse. "Plucky as they are, my crew fighting these combatants? No. Off-ship, Weizman is autonomous. Since he and his commandos don't plan to return to the 21st century, indeed don't intend to board the *Chariot* again, regrettably, there's nothing I can do. Weizman offloaded his gold and supplies long ago. I liked Ralf. How is Sonya?"

"We haven't seen her," Eddie said. "Do you believe Ralf would give nuclear technology to the Nazis?"

"No."

Eddie left the outbuilding and went up to his room.

"Hello… dear," Marisa said weakly. Her countenance was contorted with grief and fury as she played with the giggling baby. "Sonya came to me. She wants to talk, but not in the house. In the woods, in an hour."

"You told her about Ralf, that Weizman murdered him? How is she?"

"Hard to say."

A light knock at the door. Eddie went to see. It was Weizman. Eddie stepped into the hallway and closed the door behind him.

"You probably won't speak to me," Weizman said.

Eddie didn't move.

"Okay, that's fine," Weizman said. "The official project is ended. My plan now is to engage in guerrilla warfare against the Nazis. If we can't stop the Holocaust, we'll warn Jews to escape to the United States or Canada, or at least to avoid the ghettos. We will aid rescuers. Later, we'll organize partisan forces and attack the death camps. With knowledge of events and our superior weapons, we'll have considerable effect in killing guards, disrupting camp operations, and liberating prisoners.

"You and your family are free to return to the *Chariot*. Once you enter time transcendence, you may go anywhere in the universe. It's only a suggestion—but I hope you'll stay here. You'd be invaluable in helping the American and Allied Forces. Convince them to make preventing the genocide a priority. Advise them on military strategy. After the war—if there is a war—you may settle down wherever you like. This is a much nicer world than what we left. I'll give you enough gold—your pay, in fact—to be comfortable. Therreal said the *Chariot* departs in two days." Weizman said no more, but studied Eddie expectantly.

"I'll consider it." Eddie backed into their room and shut the door.

"I heard," Marisa said, picking up an umbrella. "We should meet Sonya now. It might rain."

They slipped baby Itai into his coat and walked past the combatant quarters and across the field to the invisible grave where Ralf was buried.

Marisa crossed herself and said a silent prayer, and then they took a trail that led to a grotto beside a creek with a curving, clear waterfall that dropped into a bubbly pool. Late-season wildflowers, purple and yellow, grew in abundance in the soft turf. Marisa and Eddie sat on the rocks as the baby slept in Eddie's arms. Beams of

sunlight cut down through the trees and suddenly Sonya stood before them. Though the air was still and quiet, she appeared to be leaning against a strong wind that whipped her hair around her face.

Marisa moved as if to give her a hug, but Sonya stopped her with a gesture and said in a strained, aloof voice, "The world is no better because of Weizman's actions."

"I'm so sorry about Ralf," Marisa said.

"I searched for him throughout the Cathedral," Sonya said, "but he's far away. He followed the wrong path."

As Marisa and Eddie stared, the buffeted, iridescent Sonya transfigured into a being of dull flesh and blood, and she screamed and collapsed onto the ground.

Trembling, Marisa knelt beside her and folded the baby's blanket under her head. "She's so young and so old, both."

Sonya opened her eyes and said feebly, "Shock of this corrupted realm. There's a plague on this sphere, a weight of sin. How do you endure the burden? Gravity… Muscles weak. My bones thin. I've been absent… too long."

"Get the doctor," Marisa cried. "Bring something to drink from the icebox."

Eddie jumped up and ran to find the doctor, who grabbed his medical bag. Eddie snatched a pitcher of juice and told a grim combatant to bring a stretcher.

When they reached the grotto, Marisa looked up with sad eyes and shook her head. "She didn't last at all."

The doctor confirmed she was gone. More combatants arrived and gently placed Sonya's body on the stretcher.

"Bury her beside her husband," Marisa said as the combatants bore the stretcher away, the doctor shadowing the procession.

A gloomy cloud mass had been creeping up, bringing with it a sudden gusty breeze. "Rain showers soon, maybe," Marisa said.

Now awake, the baby demanded a diaper change.

"Pear juice?" Eddie asked when Itai was fresh.

"Yes, please," she said, rinsing her hands in the stream.

They sat again on the rocks and shared from the pitcher.

"We should have accompanied the body," Eddie said.

"I want to talk first."

Eddie sighed. "Sonya was an angel."

"She was a human being with an angelic existence. Remember the science-fiction film we saw before our wedding? The ending?"

"Sky dwellers in the future? The aeronauts?"

Neither spoke for a time. The waterfall seemed to grow louder and oppress them, but it was the weight of loss they felt. The sky was growing darker. The baby waved a bare stick he had found.

"People live in solar-powered dirigibles," Marisa said at last. "Twelve hundred years from now, they're dying out because they're not having enough children anymore—the women are dying young. But it's a beautiful way to live, drifting with the clouds. The world is clean. The air and water are pure again."

"Weizman said the movie's story was fiction."

"*Weizman*," she said with contempt. "It's real. Sonya visited there years ago. Before we crossed the light barrier, she taught me a little about navigating. I want to live in that time and place."

"What about helping here, in this past?"

"Edward, my love, a historian remembers the past, not…"

"I suppose we could leave a letter and our gold for… for Raphael Lemkin. A heroic anti-genocide campaigner. Polish. Jewish. All his relatives were, will be murdered by the Nazis. He saw the Holocaust coming."

"Sonya said young people in that distant future fly gliders, high-altitude gliders for sport; I remember now… she said that Ralf's 'Oma Reitsch' would love this."

Eddie thought for a moment. "So, Ralf knew all along about his monstrous ancestor. Hanna Reitsch set gliding records."

They watched the baby attempt to pull up and stand.

"I'm tired." Eddie rubbed his hands over his face. Marisa massaged the back of his neck. "Feels good," he said. "Oh, I can't." He drew in a deep breath and exhaled in a gust. "We can't leave this time period. We can't run away."

"I know. We were daydreaming."

Eddie unconsciously crossed an arm across his belly and propped the opposite elbow on the arm, pressing his fist to his mouth. He stared ahead, searching his memory. "If we can't eliminate Hitler," he said, thinking out loud, "what other simple change might alter history for the better? What if the U.S. had developed the atom bomb earlier? What if we actually deployed it?"

"Oh, Eddie. That's so risky. We're not the right people to make that decision."

"But people are alive who might be. What if the isolationist Robert Taft had not been elected president in 1940? What if FDR had won an unprecedented third term? I believe Roosevelt would

have pushed to declare war against Japan after the invasion of Pearl Harbor. All Taft did was stage symbolic attempts to retake it and his old home, the Philippines."

"Would Franklin Roosevelt rally the American people?"

"He proclaimed he'd never send American sons into foreign wars, but he actually prepared for war by supporting the draft, for example. He gave ships and weaponry to England. And if the U.S. had entered the war, Japan probably wouldn't have conquered and held most of the Pacific Rim. Germany wouldn't have kept North Africa, half of the Soviet Union, and every bit of Europe and the British Isles."

"So, do we join Roosevelt's reelection campaign?" She picked up the baby and began making faces at him. He pointed upward and said, "Look, look."

Eddie was silent while leaves rustled overhead and the tree branches swayed in irregular rhythm. At last he spoke. "We need to stop Taft from winning the Republican nomination in 1940. And if instead, Wendell Willkie, who like Roosevelt was an interventionist, takes the nomination, Roosevelt would be bolder in his campaign. He'd likely win an electoral landslide in November."

"You know your history. So, it's settled."

"We might be able to keep the Third Reich from spreading across the world and murdering 15 million of our people by the time it collapsed in 2004."

"If we're staying here," Marisa said, "we should send letters with the *Chariot* to our family members."

"And pictures of the baby."

He took the baby from Marisa and gazed at his grinning face. "It struck me just now… I know it, but I never felt it so sharply; after what happened this morning and yesterday… Itai is not merely our baby, he's a person. A numinous person."

"I've always felt it," Marisa said.

Eddie somberly kissed Itai on a fat cheek. "Let's give our respect to Sonya and begin packing."

Just then the breeze shifted, and they heard noises rattling from the direction of the farmhouse. Gunfire. A broken, black column expanded over the trees, showing them the house's exact position, and then they smelled smoke. A flash lit the sky and thunder rumbled overhead, an explosion.

"Hallo," a female voice called. Talia Hirsch ran up, arrayed for

battle, an autocarbine slung from her neck and cradled to her chest. "We're under attack," she said. "We've been betrayed." She breathed twice in a quick pause and said with intense calmness, "The Colonel says you must go to the outbuilding immediately to be evacuated via the shuttle. He says, 'Shalom.'" At that, she turned and trotted away.

"Wait!" Eddie said.

She stopped.

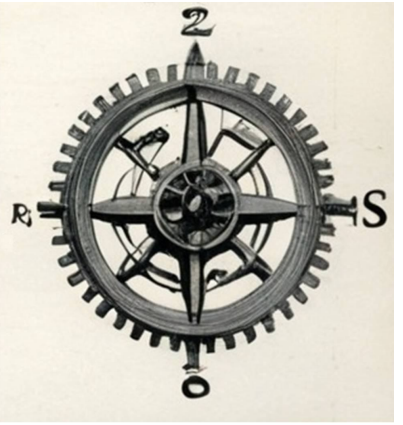
"How safe is it?"

"We're holding the house until it burns—to destroy your records and computers. We'll cover your launch. Hurry. Therreal is impatient."

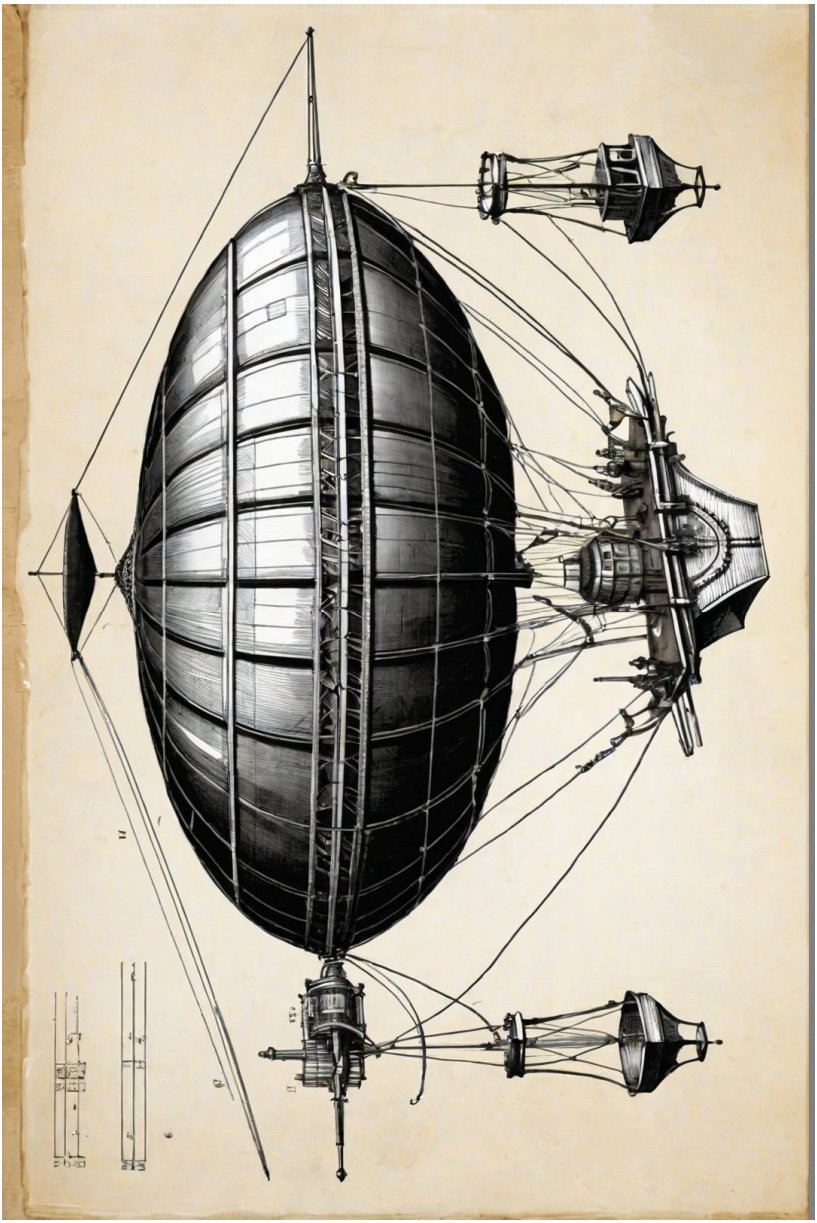
"Talia, why don't you come with us? How will you survive?"

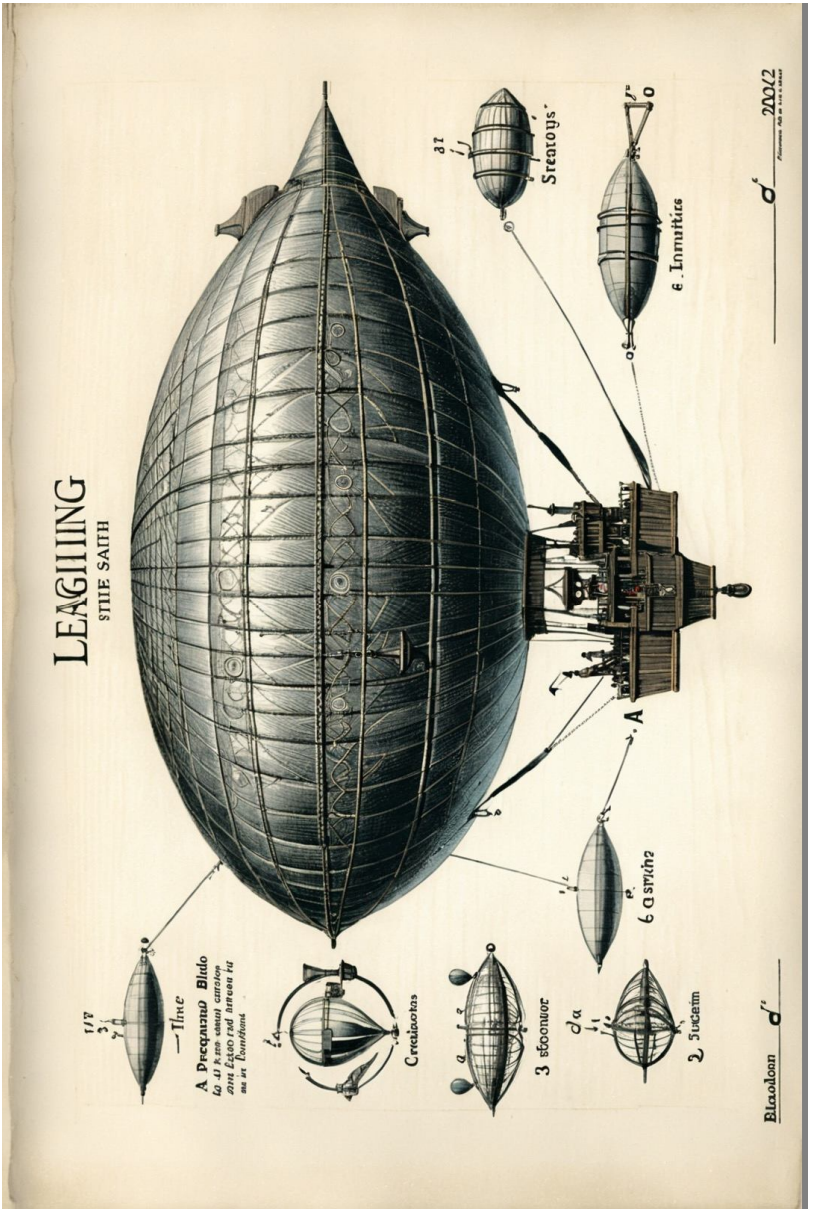
She swooped down to pick a purple wildflower, smiled, and said, "Don't be afraid on my behalf. Someone in Eternity is fighting for us." She tucked the flower's stem into her shirt pocket. "You must hurry now."

END



A Speculative Conceptual Album of Residential Lighter-than-Air Sailing Craft

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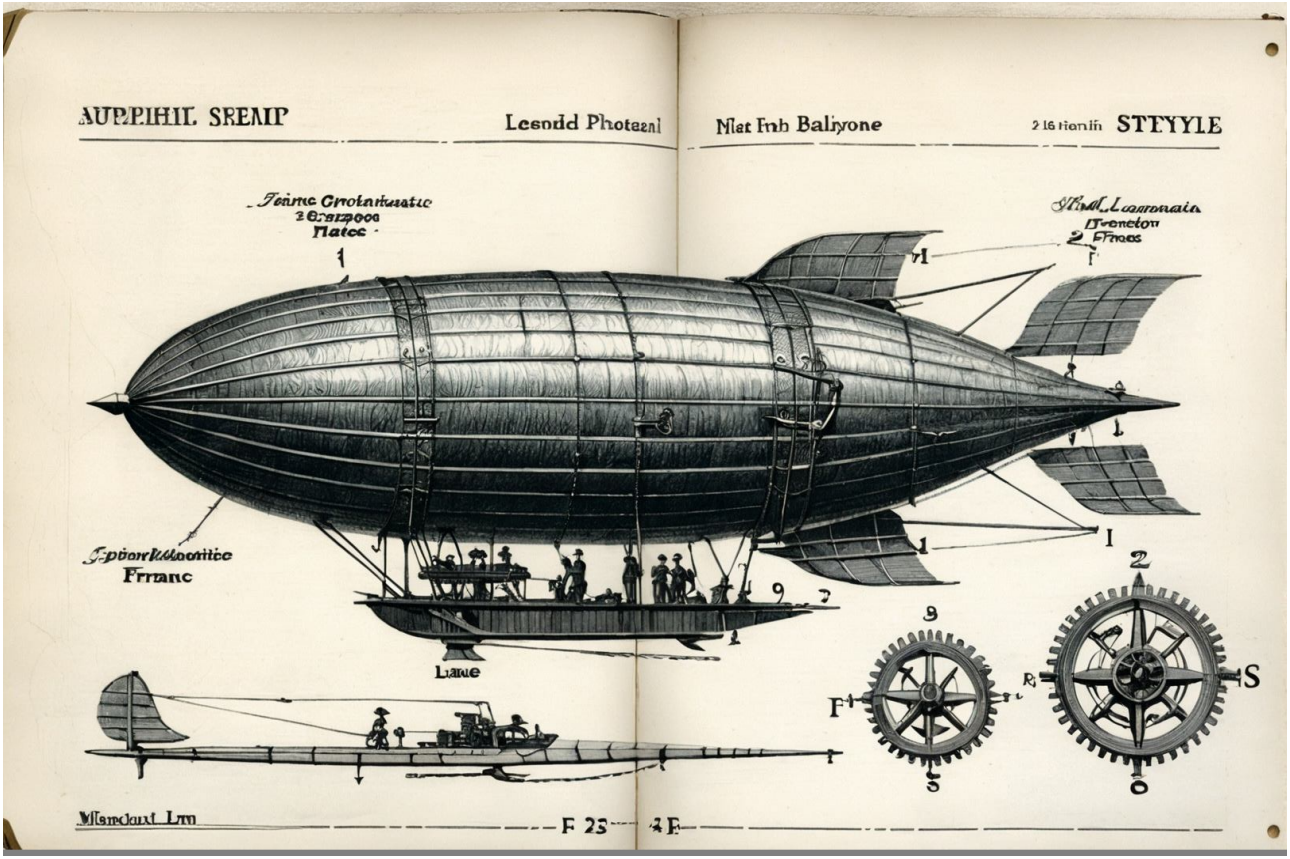

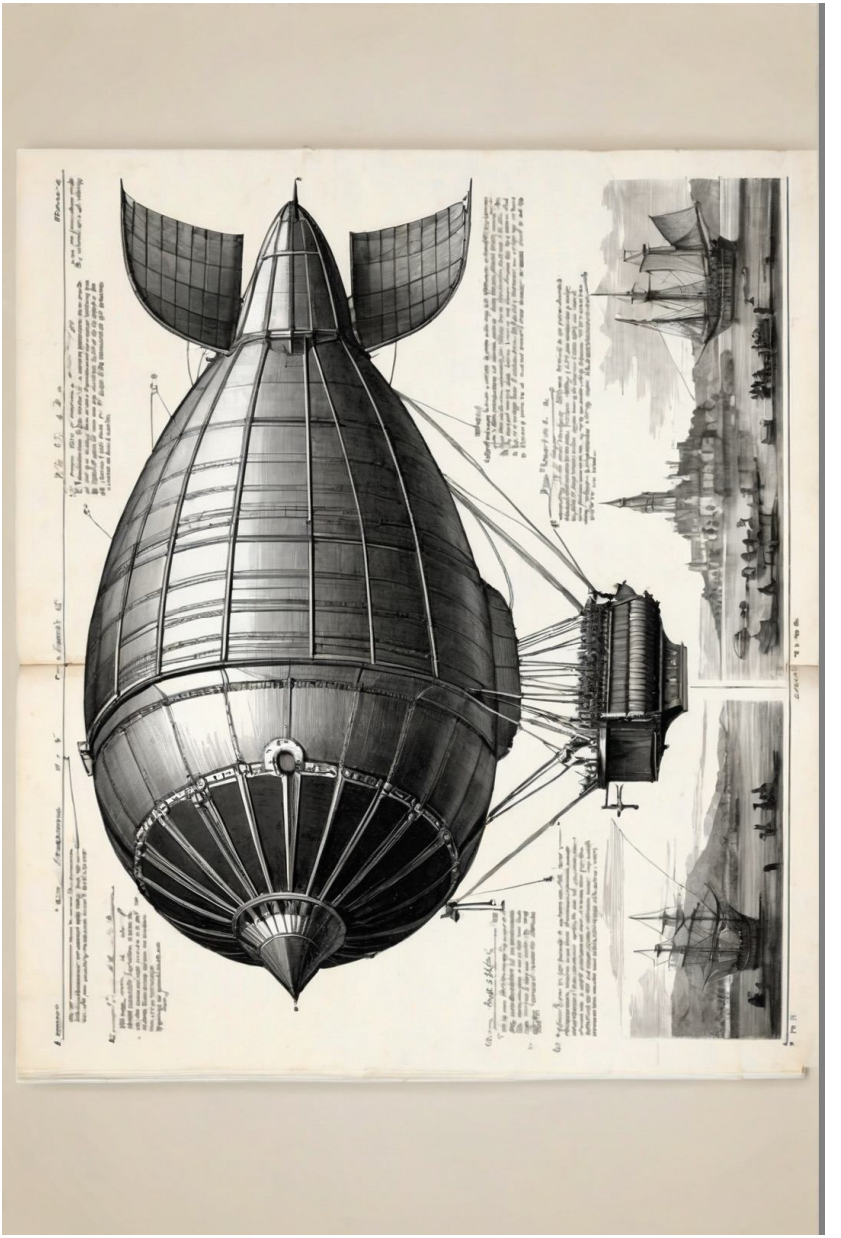

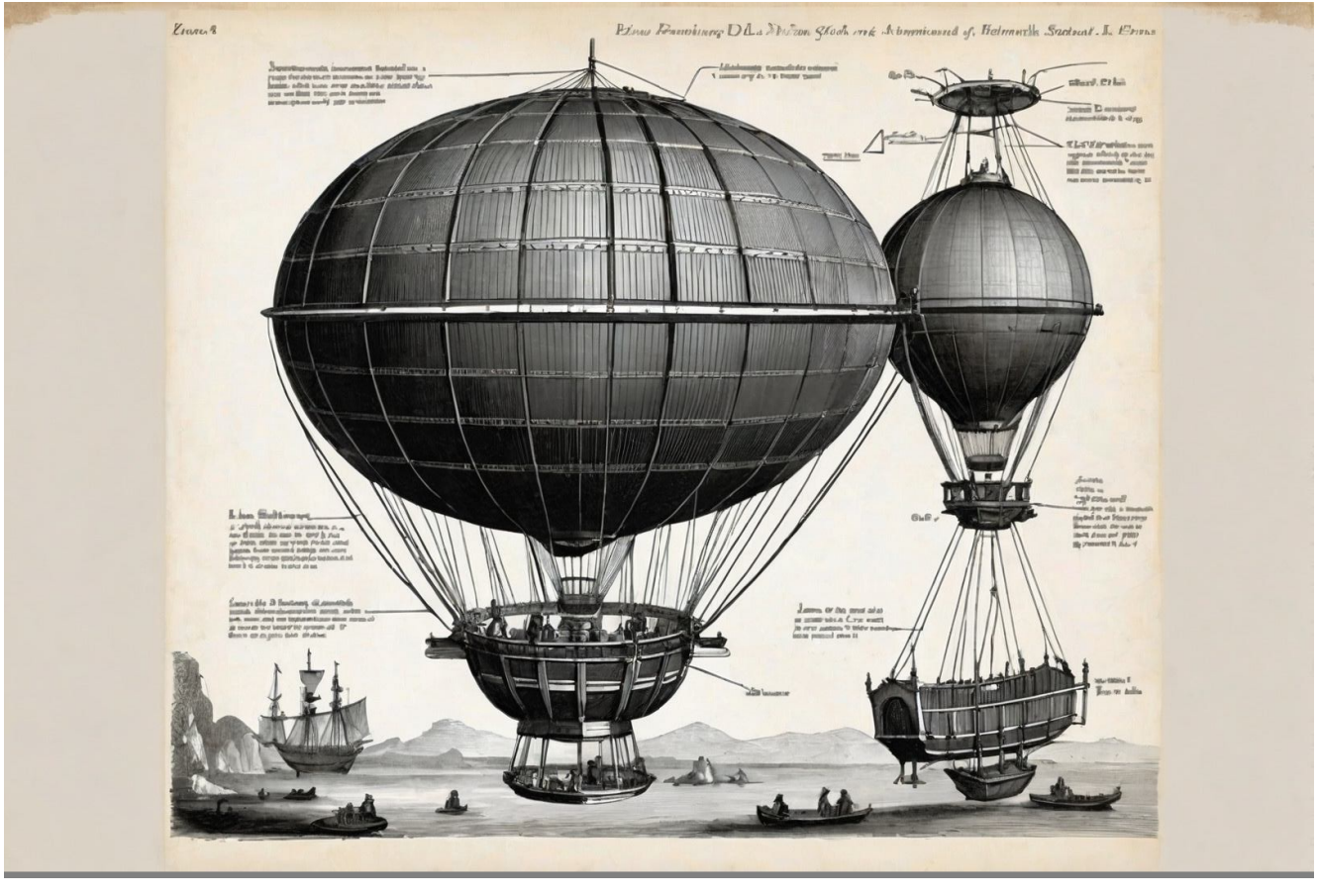

***The Author* & Castle Cape, Summer 2024**

If interested, watch some of Hunt's videos on YouTube. **UniversalDirt**.

Notes on the photographs in the book. With one exception, the photographs here have been made by the author or members of his family. The photo of the author above was taken by a pleasant young employee of the Alaska Marine Highway who was making the voyage on the *Tustumena* with us. His job, he said, was simply to report his on-board experiences back to his office in Juneau.

The photograph on page 216 at the end of the novel is the inside of the envelope of a colorful hot air balloon the author flew in once on his birthday. All but this one were captured on an iPhone 6+ and have not been enhanced or altered by AI.

The photograph of the embroidered flower on page 254 is detail of a home-made quilt the author purchased at a local thrift store.

Books by Mickey Hunt

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Clouds Fall to Earth
Black & White, Color, and Hardcover Editions
Novel (2025)

The Lone Journey Together:
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